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A Bridge Program's Effect on Non-College Ready Student Veterans

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Doctoral Dissertation (Ed.D)

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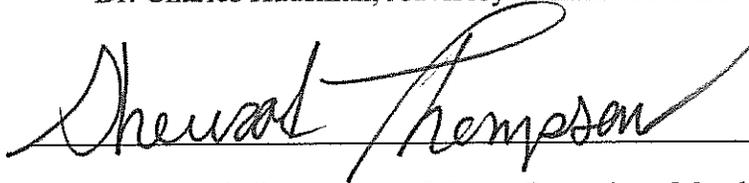
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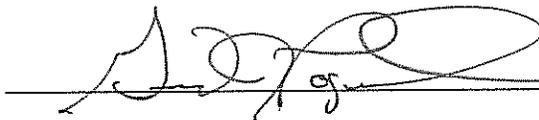
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A Bridge Program's Effect on Non-College Ready Student Veterans

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DEDICATION

       This dissertation is dedicated to the men and women of the United States Armed Forces who voluntarily place themselves in harm's way at the request of the national government and to whom we are all indebted for the sacrifices they make on our behalf. It is the hope of the researcher that this study will in some way help institutions of higher learning as they examine ways to assist those who served so selflessly on our behalf.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABSTRACT

This study examined whether a bridge program designed to remediate academic deficiencies for a cohort of student veterans has any bearing on their post-secondary success and persistence. Specifically, this study examined the Veterans Bridge to College Success (VBCS) pilot program at Eastern Kentucky University, which provides an admission pathway for student veterans with low ACT or SAT test scores, no test scores, or marginal high school or college GPAs. The study utilized both quantitative and qualitative analyses to determine whether student veterans with known academic deficiencies prior to enrollment would persist and perform at similar rates as their academically proficient peers and examine whether their academic and social cohort experience in the VBCS program had any lasting effect upon their persistence. The study examined both groups during their third and fourth academic terms when all participants were considered fully academic ready and enrolled full-time in credit bearing coursework.

The quantitative results of the study show evidence that the academic performance and retention rate of students who continued to pursue their degree after completing VBCS program did not differ significantly from their college-ready student veteran peers who did not participate in the cohort-based program. Furthermore, the qualitative portion of the study confirmed that members of the VBCS group reported lasting effects of the VBCS program on their desire to persist. Chapter 5 of the study reflects upon the value of the research in regards to policy, practice and for future research.

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Chapter 1

Veterans [leaving the service for college] deal with multiple transitions. They are leaving the military, along with their colleagues. Even though there is relief, even excitement about returning home, they are leaving the familiar, their friends, and sense of mission. At the same time that they are dealing with "role exit" matters, they are moving into two new systems: reintegrating with their families and starting college. We love to picture the male or female soldier coming home to a warm, loving family and getting back right into the groove, but that's not reality. We are really discussing a series of complex and complicated transitions.

– Dr. Schlossberg, *Veterans in Higher Education*
(DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011, p. 18)

Problem Statement

General Background

Many military service members leave the service with the intent to pursue higher education as a means of establishing a foundation for a new career. Dr. Nancy Schlossberg, a renowned social psychologist who spent most of her career as a professor of counseling psychology at the University of Maryland, College Park working with military students, paints an accurate portrait of the challenges facing this population of student veterans (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011).

Most scholars researching the field of study (DiRamio, Ackerman & Mitchell, 2008; Livingston, 2009; Pascarella, Terenzini, & Wolfe, 1986; Rumann & Hamrick,

2010) equate student veterans with the non-traditional student population, not only because they have not matriculated directly to college from high school, but also because their military service has given them broader life experiences that affect their academic performance (Soeters, Winslow & Weibull, 2006). Cunningham (2012) summates that students with military experience are more mature than their traditional or non-traditional civilian counterpart due to experiences gained during service that enhance their sense of global and cultural awareness. These post-service attributes, combined with discipline gained in the military, are likely to have a positive impact on the intentions, goals, and commitments student veterans display toward persisting in college (Cunningham, 2012).

Before effectively researching this student population, it is important to define the term "student veteran" and examine their reasons for entering and leaving military service. For this study, a student veteran is defined as a student who is currently serving in one of the branches of the Armed Forces including the National Guard, Reserve forces, and Coast Guard or has served and been discharged from one of these services. There are multiple sub-groups within the student veteran population. Active duty servicemembers are most likely students enrolled in night classes on base or taking online classes while on deployment, while members of the National Guard or Reserves balance being full or part-time students with weekend military service and intermittent deployment. The demographic origin of today's armed forces has its roots in the creation of the all-volunteer force in 1980. Forced into the recruiting business to bring in volunteers, the services found offers of lucrative educational benefits as an effective incentive for young men and women to join the military (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). Thus, the demographic

profile of the armed services over the past three decades has been shaped in large part by who could be enticed or motivated to volunteer for service.

Among the 2007-2008 cohort of military undergraduates attending institutions of higher learning, about 75 percent were discharged veterans, 16 percent were military service members on active duty, and approximately 9 percent were military service members in the reserves. Additionally, as reported by the Department of Veterans Affairs in 2001, three-fourth of all veterans were married, and ninety percent had been married at some point (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2001). The ratio of active duty, Reserve/Guard, and veterans and affiliated branch of service varies considerably based upon the geographic location of the college or university the student veteran chooses to attend. For example, institutions close to active duty military bases on the coasts may see larger contingency of Navy service members than schools further inland.

When examining this population, it is important to recognize that most undergraduate student veterans come from the enlisted ranks rather than the commissioned officer corps, who must have a Bachelor's degree before entering service. There are other factors that add complexities to any effort to examine this population of students to include reasons for enlistment, race, ethnicity, economic class, geographic heritage, gender, and nature of their service in and out of combat zones.

Research examining why individuals enlist in the military presents a fairly consistent set of motivations: altruistic expressions such as duty, service, and patriotism; self-improvement goals such as improved self-esteem and self-discipline; acquiring job skills and training; and the adventure and rite of passage motive. More pragmatic

motives tend to include: pay, benefits, enlistment bonuses, money for college, escape personal crises, and lack of civilian employment options (Woodruff, Kelty & Segal, 2006).

As of 2006 within the four armed services (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps) and the Coast Guard, there were 70.2% Whites, 17.3% Black, 1.6% American Indian or Alaska Native, 3.4% Asian, 0.6% Pacific Islander, 1.0% multiracial and 6% members of an unknown race. Of the four armed services, the Army has the most Blacks, which comprise 21.1% of the force. The greatest ratio of Hispanics to total population is in the Marine Corps, where Hispanics make up 13.1% of the force. The largest Asian demographic is in the Navy at 5.7% of active duty personnel (Lutz, 2008).

When looking at economic class, the vast majority of military servicemembers are from the lower middle class, while the offspring of the wealthy tend not to serve at all. Military service for many means a boost in their economic lifestyle and the opportunity for self improvement in terms of economic standing and self-esteem. Indeed, research indicates that enlistment in the military can be a turning point in the career trajectory for many who come from disadvantaged circumstances (Lutz, 2008).

Geographically speaking, since 1985, there has been a shift of enlistments with a drop in service members coming from the North and an increase in those from southern states. Currently, enlistments from the south are over-represented by about eight percent each year. In 1996, the South had only 15.4 percent of the US population, but 31.5 percent of military personnel (Langston, 2000).

From a gender perspective, at the birth of the all-volunteer force in 1973, women represented just 1.6 percent of all active duty personnel, but by 2006 made up nearly 16 percent of the total active service population. Of all the services, the Air Force has the largest female population at 20 percent, with the Marine Corps having the smallest with only 6 percent (Kelty, Kleykamp and Segal, 2010). Among veterans who served since September 11, 2001, 750,000 were women. While women represented just 7 percent of all U.S. veterans in 2005, they represented 27 percent of all military undergraduates in the 2007–08 college cohort (Radford, 2009).

When considering both race and gender against the service profile, African-Americans are generally over-represented, with African-American women out serving men by a margin of nearly 2:1. Almost half of all women in uniform are racial/ethnic minorities; with African-Americans accounting for nearly 30 percent. Among Hispanics, men have historically outnumbered women; however by 2006, Latinas surpassed Latinos in both the enlisted and officer ranks (Kelty, et al., 2010).

The most defining variable for veterans is combat experience, which can also vary by service and occupational specialty. In today's Navy, most seaman have served in a combat zone, but unlike their grandfathers of World War II, they have never truly faced life threatening situations on the high seas. Again, this is not universally true because Navy Corpsman often go ashore with Marines contingents. The same holds for Navy Seals or other special operations forces from any of the services. Combat experience matters in two ways – it changes a person's perspective on life, and those changes can

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have long lasting mental and physical health effects long after military service ends (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010).

A final factor that should not be dismissed is length of service. Most service members serve four to six years on an initial enlistment and then get out. Transition for this population may differ greatly from that of career service personnel leaving after 20 years of service and seeking educational skills to begin a second profession.

Given the complexity of the populations referred to as student veterans, it is vitally important that the full understanding of the demographic profile be considered when developing a research design or interpreting the results from such research. Researchers studying student veterans must avoid broad generalizations or attempts to derive universal conclusions that may have limited applicability when cast against the demographic profile. Any study of student veteran populations should attempt to isolate as many extenuating variables as possible to achieve an accurate analysis of the information. Studies with limited scope and well defined parameters will likely yield more meaningful research and add greater understanding to the field of study than broad studies with little depth.

Veterans in Higher Education

In looking at student veterans in a higher education setting, in 2009, the American Council on Education's Military Service Members in Higher Education report indicated that active-duty and veterans represented just 4 percent of all undergraduate student enrollments in postsecondary education. Furthermore, 43 percent of students with military experience attended public two-year institutions, 21 percent attended public four-

year institutions, 12 percent enrolled in private nonprofit institutions, and 12 percent enrolled in private for-profit institutions (Radford, 2009). The struggle for military veterans leaving the service with higher education in mind is in making a successful transition from the highly structured military environment to the collegial exploratory atmosphere of a college campus. How well they make that transition depends on many factors, from their own college readiness to the support provided by the institution they select to attend. In *Veterans in Higher Education*, DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) postulate that "these students are neither overly needy nor disgruntled; they simply need assistance in getting started, and once set on a positive path or trajectory for success, their maturity, discipline, and initiative will lead them to personal accomplishment and academic achievement." (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011, p. 17).

The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) has begun to track the characteristics of the student veteran population. HERI reports that student veterans tend to be slightly older than their civilian counterparts, have lower high school grade point averages (GPAs) and often require additional preparatory remedial work. These students also characterized themselves as lower in "academic self concept" and higher in "leadership ability" compared to their peers (HERI, 2009). A 2007-2008 study further distinguished this population as more likely to be a first-generation college student, male, married, and with at least one dependent (Lang & Powers, 2011).

Student veterans tend to prefer education programs with job-related curricula, which may explain why they struggle at four-year universities (Cunningham, 2012). Four-year universities, especially public state-run universities, are generally much larger

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than community colleges, present a much more diverse student body, and offer an extensive range of degree programs. For observers with military experience, it is easy to see how newly discharged veterans and those still serving in the reserves lose themselves to the extended freedom of self-regulated activity. Transitioning from a highly regimented schedule where they have little free time to arriving on campus where they have ample time to reflect upon their past service and their current situation may only reinforce the daunting isolation they may feel (Cunningham, 2012).

It is important to recognize that academic experience for active duty, reservist, and discharged veterans is very different. The active duty service member finds it difficult to attend classes because of military duties despite a strong desire to spend off-duty time in academic pursuit. Based upon the type of unit to which they are assigned, active duty service members may find that the time available to pursue college comes in short bursts of a few weeks disrupted by mission tasks or deployments. Depending upon the unit, mission, and location, other active duty members may actually find that they can take classes even when deployed, depending on internet access to obtain online instruction and whether the classes can be arranged around their work schedule. For those in the Navy, classes often are taught onboard ship by qualified instructors for an accredited institution like Central Texas College. Service members must have the permission of the leaders in the chain-of-command who can deny permission should they believe that class work might interfere with the performance of duty or negatively impact the unit's overall mission (Radford, 2009).

Reservists face many of the same struggles as active duty service members but may also struggle with trying to arrange school work around shorter deployments for training from one to three weeks in length, often within an academic semester. These student veterans must find instructors who are willing to accommodate lengthy absences when given advance notice. Post deployment support services also vary from those offered to active duty service members simply because of the fact that these service members revert to serving only one weekend a month once they return and may not have local access to base services (Livingston, 2009).

Finally, discharged veterans who have left service face their own set of issues, from losing the sense of structure and camaraderie military service provides or enjoying too greatly the new freedom from the same. Discharged veterans must also adjust to the financial challenge presented by having a reduced source of income and having to navigate the pathways of financial aid, unemployment, and benefits from the Veterans Administration (VA). These challenges are in addition to learning the networks of higher education and the expectations of self direction.

Within the student veteran population, there are three distinct sub-groups: transfer students who took some college work before entering or during service, first-time college students who have never taken any college coursework but are academically prepared, and first-time college students who have never taken any college coursework and are not academically prepared. While these first-time college students are freshmen academically, they should not be considered traditional students. Even though they may be as young as many of their peers, their individual military experiences have matured

them in many ways, making them much more akin to the non-traditional student population in terms of interests, behavior, and academic performance. For some student veterans, especially those recently exposed to combat, the immaturity of the typical traditional age non-veteran student peers is both perplexing and agitating. As one Iraq veteran told a researcher, "the things they care about, like parties and girls, they don't feel important to me" (Gasendo, 2008, p. 1).

A major obstacle to conducting this study was the fact that few four-year universities admit students who do not have the prerequisite academic credentials. Admission policies at most colleges and universities use grade point average (GPA) and standardized test scores such as the American College Test (ACT) or Standardized Achievement Test (SAT) as their main criteria for admission (Steele, Salcedo & Coley, 2010). These policies fail to take into account the maturity and discipline individuals leaving military service possess nor the likelihood that past academic performance may not be the best indicator of potential or current capabilities. Comparing grades veterans received years ago when they may not have been taking high school seriously as they anticipated military service rather than college puts veterans at a sizable disadvantage for admission into the nation's best universities (Cunningham, 2012).

Study Focus and Purpose

This study focused upon the sub-group comprised of student veterans with academic deficiencies such as low standardized test scores, no test scores, or low secondary school grade point averages. The study looked at whether a cohort bridge program for remediating their academic deficiencies has any bearing on their post-

secondary success. Because most traditional four-year institutions require students to remediate academic deficiencies before being accepted for admission, this study was limited to one specific program at Eastern Kentucky University (EKU), a four-year public institution that provides this opportunity to student veterans. The Veterans Bridge to College Success (VBCS) pilot program at EKU uses academic placement exams to determine the admissibility of veterans (and adult learners) with low ACT or SAT test scores, no test scores, or marginal high school or college GPAs. At many, if not most, universities these students would likely have been directed to a community college or Veterans Upward Bound programs to remediate college readiness deficiencies and required to subsequently reapply for admission. After admitted to the VBCS program, students are placed in a veteran-only learning community where students take a transition to college course tailored to veterans and attend refresher (i.e. developmental) math, English and reading courses together depending upon their placement exam results. The transition to college course is taught by a veteran and is tailored to include information on campus and community veterans' service, adjusting to civilian life, and coping with consequences of service, and it serves as the principal catalyst for social integration into higher education. After the first semester, VBCS students may take one or two remaining refresher or full-credit courses with peers in English, math or communications while also taking instruction in the major. By the end of the first year VBCS students are fully integrated into the main stream of student life with no mandated follow up or forced socialization.

The objective of this study was to discern whether participation in the VBCS program had any significant effect on the persistence of study group members as compared to their non-cohort student veteran peers. The study utilized both quantitative and qualitative analyses to determine whether student veterans with known academic deficiencies prior to enrollment would persist and perform at similar rates as their academically proficient peers, as well as to examine whether their academic and social cohort experience in the VBCS program had any lasting impact upon their persistence.

The study specifically compared students who had completed the VBCS program with student veterans who were admitted as fully academic ready from the beginning and who began attending EKU at the same time as the study group. The study examined both groups during their third and fourth academic terms when all participants were considered fully academic ready and enrolled full-time in credit bearing coursework. To improve the accuracy of the study, active duty members still serving were excluded because there are no military bases nearby with active duty personnel and active duty personnel enrolled at EKU are taking coursework only through online distance learning. The study did not attempt to evaluate other external factors that might impact persistence such as post-traumatic stress or financial adjustments, assuming these factors to be equally distributed across the entire student veteran population.

Definition of Terms

Significant or infrequent terms used in this study are defined as follows:

Academic Deficiency is defined as not having sufficient entry level qualifications for standard admission to the university (EKU), such as low grade point average, low test

scores, or no test scores. Students with academic deficiencies are considered under-prepared in terms of college readiness.

Active Duty is defined as full-time service as opposed to part-time duty as with the Guard or Reserves.

All-Volunteer Force is defined as the point in time when the mandatory draft of men into the armed services ended and all service commitments were done on a voluntary basis.

Bridge Program is defined as any program created to specifically help under-prepared students make a successful transition into college. The Veterans Bridge to College Success (VBCS) is a bridge program designed to assist under-prepared student veterans.

Cohort or Learning Community are used interchangeably in this study to mean linked courses where the same group of students co-register in a cluster of classes for an entire semester. Both words may have alternate meanings in research but are limited to this definition in this research.

Non-traditional Student or Adult Learner are used interchangeably to mean students who are not entering college in a traditional manner; that is, coming directly from high school. Both words may have differing definitions in research but are limited to this definition for this study.

Student Veteran is defined as a student who is currently serving in one of the branches of the Armed Forces including the National Guard, Reserve forces, and Coast Guard or has served and been discharged from one of these services.

Study Importance

The importance of this study was three-fold. Resources for such programs as the VBCS are an investment by the institution towards achieving its ultimate goal of graduating students; therefore, an evaluation of the program's effectiveness is essential to good fiscal stewardship. Of like importance was the value an evaluation of a bridge program may provide other institutions seeking to justify such an investment of resources and looking for supporting data to make a decision. However the most important value of the study was to determine whether or not the bridge program is truly helping the enrolled veterans achieve their desired educational outcomes.

Inquiry Statement

One goal of the study was to determine whether student veterans with known academic deficiencies persist or achieve at the same rate as their college ready peers and whether their academic and social experiences have had any bearing upon these outcomes. Specifically, the study compared third and fourth term grade point averages, third and fourth term course credits earned, and third to fifth term retention rates between the VBCS study group and a control group of college ready new first time freshmen veteran peers who entered the EKU at the same time.

The second goal was to assess whether the academic and social integration of both groups of students differ and if VBCS students note any lasting effect of the integration achieved by VBCS on their academic performance or desire to persist in subsequent semesters.

Quantitative Research Questions

Based on these inquiry statements, the specific quantitative research questions for this study were:

1) Does the mean term GPA among student veterans remediated through VBCS differ from non-VBCS veterans' GPA during their third and fourth academic terms?

2) Does the mean percentage of credits passed by VBCS participants differ from non-VBCS veterans' pass rate during their third and fourth academic terms?

3) Does the mean retention rate to the fifth term of former VBCS participants differ from non-VBCS veterans' rate?

Hypotheses

Based on the research questions above, the following hypotheses were tested:

H1. There will be no significant difference in term GPA between the student veterans who participated in VBCS and student veterans who did not participate.

H2. There will be no significant difference between the class pass rates of former VBCS student veterans and non-VBCS student veterans.

H3. There will be no significant difference in retention rates to the fifth term of former VBCS student veterans and non-VBCS student veterans.

Qualitative Research Questions

1. In adjusting to college, what did you find was the biggest challenge in the classroom?

2. In adjusting to college, what did you find was the biggest challenge outside the classroom?

3. Describe what assistance from the institution you found helpful in staying in college?

4. Describe what assistance from others you found helpful in staying in college?

5. Do you know many other military veterans attending the college?

6. Do you consider you military veteran friends key to your support group to stay in college?

7. Academically speaking, how well do you feel you are succeeding?

8. In terms of social integration, how strongly do you feel connected to others on campus?

9. On a scale of 1-10 how important was the social integration with other veterans through the cohort program to your desire or ability to persist in college? (Asked of VBCS Study Group Only)

Overview of Methods

The study as described above, utilized a mixed method, dual approach, using both quantitative analyses of student academic achievement and retention alongside a qualitative assessment of student veterans' transition experiences and what motivated them to achieve and persist. Quantitative statistical tools included independent sample t-test. Qualitative phenomenological structured interviews with two focus groups strived to generate a deeper understanding of the guiding research questions and the difference between each group's experiences in transitioning to college. Because the quantitative

data already existed at the outset of this study, this study employed an ex post facto or after the fact causal comparative research design for the quantitative component.

Study Boundaries

Given that there are hundreds of thousands of student veterans attending institutions of higher learning, the opportunity for research is enormous; however, much of the research on this population fails to add substantially to the body of knowledge because the depth of the research is insufficient (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Superficial examination of the plethora of issues affecting student veteran success has led to tangential assumptions with little empirical supporting data. Therefore, the scope of this study was specifically narrow, examining only the results of a specialized bridge program offered at Eastern Kentucky University.

Based on prior research, external environmental factors are reported to have detrimental effects on adult learner persistence (Bean, 1982; Bean & Metzner, 1985). However, measures regarding psychological and environmental factors are not included in this study intentionally. Specifically, variables such as satisfaction, post-traumatic stress, financial aid, and emotional support from family have been mitigated by narrowing the study to just veterans at the same institution. The study assumes that by excluding non-veterans all student veterans are equally likely express a similar ratio of external environmental factors across both groups of study.

Summary

Given the heterogeneous complexity of the populations referred to as student veterans, considerable thought was given to developing a research design that advances

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the knowledge base without over interpretation. Broad generalized studies may contribute to the overall body of knowledge but are unlikely to produce findings that can help administrators in higher education develop actionable policies and procedures for assisting student veterans.

This study examined whether the VBCS pilot program offered by Eastern Kentucky University had any effect on student academic performance or retention of the students enrolled. The goal of the inquiry was to determine whether student veterans with known academic deficiencies persist or achieve at the same rate as their non-deficient veteran peers and whether their academic and social experiences had any bearing upon these outcomes. A major limitation of this research is that it may not be easily replicated or generalized. Nonetheless, this study benefits institutions who might be considering such a model to assist returning veterans in the pursuit of their academic goal. A more detailed discussion of the limitation of the study can be found in Chapter 3, Methods. In the succeeding chapter, the literature review focuses on three areas of broad academic research: retention and persistence theory, developmental education, and learning communities to establish a foundation for examining the VBCS program and the research questions proposed.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Overview

One of the significant problems in conducting research on student veterans is the lack of statistical data related to student veteran retention and success. The term limited is used because national data on student veteran retention and success is almost non-existent. In fact, in April, 2012, President Obama issued an executive order: *Establishing Principles of Excellence for Education Institutions serving Service Members, Veterans, Spouses, and other Family Members*. The order requires:

> The Secretaries of Defense, Veterans Affairs, and Education shall develop a comprehensive strategy for developing service member and veteran student outcome measures that are comparable, to the maximum extent practicable, across Federal military and veterans educational benefit programs, including, but not limited to, the Post-9/11 GI Bill and the Tuition Assistance Program. To the extent practicable, the student outcome measures should rely on existing administrative data to minimize the reporting burden on institutions participating in these benefit programs. The student outcome measures should permit comparisons across Federal educational programs and across institutions and types of institutions. The Secretary of Education, in consultation with the Secretaries of Defense and Veterans Affairs, shall also collect from educational institutions, as part of the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System and other data collection systems, information on the amount of funding received pursuant to the Post-9/11 GI Bill and the Tuition Assistance Program. – (Executive Order, April 2012)

The order clearly recognizes the lack of student outcome measurements for this population and directs the Secretary of Education to collect the information through the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). Additionally, the Department of Veterans Affairs and the National Student Clearinghouse have entered into an

agreement to track student veterans through graduation. This will be most helpful since military veterans often have academic records at multiple institutions.

Prior to this order by President Obama, the Veterans Administration could only report the percent of veterans who had exhausted their benefits as an indicator of degree completion and only began requiring schools to report graduation of students drawing education benefits in Fall 2011. The lack of precise data had NBC reporting, based upon a presentation published by the Colorado Workforce Development Council, that the national average for graduation from a four-year university was 57 percent, but the graduation rate for returning veterans from the same institutions were estimated at only 3 percent. This was followed by a footnote indicating that it was difficult to obtain clear evidence since the Department of Education does not study veteran students and the veteran number came from estimates from the Association of American Colleges and Universities and various other post secondary organizations (Cunningham, 2012).

The figures in Table 2.1 below reflect the educational status of all veterans including, but not limited to, those receiving Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits (Bureau, 2012). In 2008, the Veterans Administration reported that student veterans used on average about seventeen out of thirty-six months of their Post-9/11 educational benefits and only 6 percent had used the entire thirty-six months (Field, 2008). In 2009, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that 35.9% of veterans had obtained a degree in six years compared with 49.6% for non-veterans. On a broad scale, the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs reports the following data comparison of veteran and non-veteran education attainment:

Table 2.1: Veteran Education Levels

	Veterans	Non-Veterans
College graduate	26.3%	28.8%
Some college or associate degree	36.3%	28.1%
High-school graduate, no college	29.7%	28.3%
Less than a high-school diploma	7.6%	14.9%

Source: Bureau, U. S. C. (n.d.). American FactFinder – Results. Retrieved November 6, 2012, from http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_11_1YR_S2101&prodType=table.

Interestingly, the 95% confidence interval for these statistics was 48.3-50.8 for non-veterans, while the 95% confidence interval for veterans was only 24.4-47.4.

The only national funding for college readiness support for veterans comes through the Department of Education's Veterans Upward Bound (VUB) program. VUB is a free U.S. Department of Education TRIO program designed to help eligible U.S. military veterans enter and succeed in the postsecondary school of their choosing. VUB services assessment of academic skills, academic refresher courses in math, laboratory science, composition, reading, literature, foreign language, and computer skills. Other services include assistance completing college admission forms, personal academic advising and career counseling; help with application for GI Bill benefits; assistance completing financial aid forms or finding scholarships; career guidance and planning; tutoring and mentoring; and referrals to other community agencies serving veterans (VUB Program Information, 2013). In September 2012, the Department of Education awarded $14.3 million dollars to support fifty-one Veterans Upward Bound projects at colleges and universities across the country (Appendix A). Altogether, these programs

will help 6,831 veterans acquire the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in college. The project's aim is to increase the college-going and completion rates of low-income, first-generation military veterans, and support the government's ongoing commitment to improving service members' transition from military life to civilian life by fostering educational opportunities, and career and workforce readiness skills (Department Awards, 2012).

Given the hundreds of thousands of student veterans attending college, the VUB programs have limited reach. The National Association of Veterans Upward Bound (NAVUB) program has been collecting data from member program since 2004. For the 2011-2012 school year, 57.8% of the 48 programs submitted data on persistence and progression to post-secondary education. NAVUB reported 51.8% of students who began the remediation completed the instruction, 27.0% persisted to the next level, and 21.2% did not complete the program nor continue. Of students who had completed the VUB remediation program, 38.3% enrolled in post-secondary education, 27.0% persisted in college, and 34.7% did not enroll or continue in college (Mela, 2013).

Although VUB services are free to veterans, the programs are administered prior to college admission and do not provide cost-of-living financial aid like the GI Bill, which many married veterans find essential to post service survival. While VUB programs are a source of funding and support for veterans with college readiness deficiencies, VUB is a limited resource that can reach only a fraction of the veterans who need assistance in beginning their educational trek. The VBCS program was designed as an institutionally-funded alternative when VUB services are not available and capitalizes

on the Post 9-11 GI Bill to fund college preparation. A major downside to using GI Bill benefits for college readiness needs is that veterans who need substantial assistance in preparing for college are using benefits designed to help them complete a four-year degree with 36 months of entitlement. Veterans in these circumstances may exhaust their benefits before they achieve their graduation goal.

In looking beyond college preparation, it is important to stay focused on the ultimate prize – graduation. In a collaborative venture between Operation College Promise (OCP) and the Pat Tillman Foundation, student veterans at highly supported, veteran friendly campuses were found to persist at rates consistent with their non-veteran peers. Operation College Promise is a policy, research and information program supporting the postsecondary education advancement of servicemembers and veterans of the United States Armed Forces. OCP was founded by the New Jersey Association of State Colleges and Universities (NJASCU) and was one of 20 recipients of the American Council on Education/Walmart "Success for Veterans" grants in 2009. In one study, OCP surveyed over 6,000 student veterans at six campuses across the nation where student veterans on those campuses averaged 24 credits per academic year. This put that cohort well within the six-year graduation rate and near the 5-year national average as reported by the College Board in 2008 as an average time to earn a bachelor's degree. While an assessment of the entire veteran population was beyond the scope of this study, student veterans that were attending schools with robust veteran support services and veteran friendly policies progressed towards a degree at rates consistent with their non-

military peers (Lang & Powers, 2011). The VBCS program fits these criteria; therefore similar results should be expected.

As evidenced from the variance of national data, any study of the student veteran population must establish its own baseline or comparative group in order to obtain relevant understanding of the issues at hand. This may explain the dearth of quantitative research on student veteran issues due to the lack of comparable statistics. It is possible that President Obama's executive order will eventually create a national pool of data on the student veteran population that will spur statistical analyses and research on veteran retention and success. In the interim, researchers will be left to their own methods for delivering accurate and meaningful research.

Because there is so little data on student veteran retention and success, the literature review for this study focused on three areas of broad academic research: retention and persistence theory, developmental education, and learning communities to establish a foundation for examining the Veterans Bridge to College Success (VBCS) program and the research questions proposed.

Selection and Review Process

An extensive search of multiple databases was used to locate relevant dissertations, peer reviewed articles, and professional research. The descriptors veteran, developmental education, learning communities, retention, and persistence were used with the qualifier of higher education to obtain information related to the student. Databases searched include Academic Search Premier, Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), (Stein & Wanstreet,

2006), and Proquest Dissertations and Theses (PQDT). In addition, the search engine Google Scholar was employed (van Aalst, 2010). Finally a narrative analysis was done to determine relevancy.

Literature Quality

The quality of the literature review varied from massive Rand studies sanctioned by the Department of Veterans Affairs and the American Council on Education (ACE) to newspaper articles and internet blog entries of less substantial breath. There is a dearth of statistical data on the student veteran population in particular, but the volume of theoretical work related to this population has grown as witnessed by the increasing number of dissertations related to veterans' issues. In regard to retention and persistent theories and developmental education, there are significant quantities of research; however, there are fewer when the qualifiers of non-traditional or adult learner are added to the equation. Literature related to learning communities is relatively small in comparison to developmental education, which has been studied for over 30 years. Overall, the scope, relevance, and methodological quality of literature reviewed was sufficient to provide the necessary foundation needed to conduct this study.

Developmental Education

Developmental education, also called remediation, is a series of courses that provide instruction in basic academic skills such as math, reading and English. Placement tests such as the Compass or school developed placement exams are used by most intuitions to place students at the appropriate level. Rules determining college readiness levels are often regulated by the state, and students who fail to reach set placement test

scores are required to take developmental education before they are eligible to take full credit college-level courses (Chiang, 2012).

Ideally, the design of developmental education aims to bring weak academic college students up to adequate college-level (Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2010). Remediation serves as a leveling function to make sure students who enter college are fully prepared to succeed from an academic point of view. It is also seen as a mechanism to secure equity for disadvantaged groups (Chiang, 2012). As graduation rates and employability of college graduates have come under ever greater scrutiny, pressure to improve student outcomes has risen along with research examining various programmatic interventions (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Two-year community colleges are the primary institutions that provide remediation since they educate most academically underprepared adults compared to their four-year selective counterparts (Chaing, 2012). Historically, developmental education accounts for between 25 to 80 percent of courses taught at colleges, varying based upon 2-year or 4-year classification and selectivity (Grubb et al., 1999). The research yields mixed results on the effect of developmental education on persistence and college completion (Bahr, 2010; Bettinger & Long, 2009; Calcagno & Long, 2008; Hawley & Chiang, 2011; Melguizo, Bos, Prather, & Melguizo, 2011). Namely, it is hard to describe the impact of remediation on degree completion due to the complexity and inconsistency among state policies and practices (Chiang, 2012).

The implementation of developmental education varies greatly in content, structure, and duration, making the investigation into the effectiveness of developmental

education difficult (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Comparing developmental education programs becomes more difficult as the variance in the structure of institutions, admission policies, student demographics, and remediation methodologies are factored into the equation. However, considerable analyses and critiques of developmental education remain, because despite a tremendous increase in the number of such programs, increases in enrollment, degree completion rates at most community colleges have not risen (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009).

The low college completion rates of students in the U.S. have led many states to mandate academic readiness standards and programmatic interventions. Developmental education is a pocket book issue given the rise in the cost of education, especially at public universities where most state funding has been in continuous decline. More students are being drawn or directed towards higher education because of the growing discrepancy in wages between high school diploma holders and college graduates (Yeats, 2005). Specifically, college degrees or certificates have become the prerequisite to hold a sustainable job in today's labor market (Perdue, 2008). Nonetheless, of the 150 million workers above the age of sixteen, about half have a high school diploma or less (Jacobs & Tolbert-Bynum, 2009). In this sense, college plays a decisive role in preparing individuals for the adulthood task of gainful employment sufficient to assure financial independence (Chiang, 2012).

Today, students who may have been directed toward vocational work in the past are being encouraged, often by parents, to seek higher education in order to achieve the goal of financial independence, regardless of their college academic readiness. Since

developmental courses are non-credit bearing for the purposes of degree completion, this means additional costs and most likely increased school loan debt upon graduation.

According to the National Association of Developmental Education (NADE), roughly 58 percent of all community college students and 23 percent of all bachelor's degree seeking students nationally take at least one developmental education course in college (NADE, 2009). Combined with the reality that many remediated students fail to progress through the system towards a degree (Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2010), the issue of developmental education and its impact on student debt has come under increased scrutiny. According to a June 2010 Kentucky Council on Post-Secondary Education (CPE) report, over 77 percent of academically-prepared first-time, full-time college students in Kentucky were retained the following fall, compared to only 67 percent of underprepared students. More importantly, the persistence gap widens with each subsequent year. By the end of the fourth year, only 24 percent of college-ready students graduated, and only 6 percent of non-college ready students achieved the same outcome. Using the six year graduation benchmark, nearly 57 percent of prepared students graduated compared to 34 percent of underprepared students (CPE, 2010).

Research findings from older studies conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions are generally positive (Amey & Long, 1998; Hoyt, 1999); however, questions regarding college readiness and student outcomes remain (Hoyt, 1999). A 1997 meta-analysis of developmental programs conducted by Boylan, Bliss, and Bonham that examined mandatory assessment and placement's effect on the success and retention of college students found that while these mandates did not impact overall retention rates

or grade point averages, these factors did affect student success within the specific developmental coursework. Hoyt (1999) conducted a study to examine the influence of student need for remediation on retention rates at a community college. Based on that study, Hoyt concluded that predicting retention of underprepared students is difficult because of the many factors involved, but that first-term academic performance had the strongest relationship with student retention, followed by financial aid (Hoyt, 1999). College attainment literature reports that while test scores and high school grades are important predictors of first-year college performance, these relationships diminish as time in college progresses. Such background factors become less important predictors of persistence, while faculty-student interaction, relationships, and engagement become more relevant (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2001; Hurtado, 1997; Ishitani & Desjardins, 2002). Some studies indicate that college GPA is the most important factor in predicting retention in college (Astin, 1997; Bennett, 2003).

If anything is conclusive from the research, it clearly illustrates that colleges and universities are continuing to search for the magic formula to address college readiness deficiencies among the veteran student population. In Kentucky, where this study took place, statewide efforts are directed towards increase collaboration between secondary and post-secondary faculty to effect remediation prior to entering college. All Kentucky high school students are given the ACT during their junior year. College faculty members then collaborate with high school teachers to develop remediation strategies. Students who have low test scores are placed in classes to address these deficiencies during their senior year of high school and at the end of the term, given college

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placement exams to determine if the deficiencies have been successfully eliminated. The results are forwarded to prospective colleges statewide. This innovative approach has saved millions of dollars in college tuition for students who in the past would have been saddled with those costs in the form of non-credit bearing developmental coursework (CPE, 2010). While this approach is helpful to traditional students, it does not effectively address the non-traditional student population to which student veterans belong.

While there is considerable debate over whether developmental education positively effects student retention and graduation or simply prolongs the drop out of underprepared students, the reality is community colleges and traditional enrollment universities are obligated to prepare these students for the rigor of the classroom. Students must be prepared to read and understand the text of the courses they undertake and present clear, cogent, and creative discussions of the subject in the form of oral and written assessments. Until all students begin arriving for college fully prepared, the need for and delivery of developmental education will continue, and the forms of delivery will continue to be adjusted in search of the magic formula that will result in higher retention and success.

Persistence and Retention

Increasing retention is an ever-present goal for institutions of higher learning. Identifying successful strategies for enhancing retention rates has challenged institutions for decades, and stagnant graduation rates reflect this conundrum. However, assessing retention is one of the few metrics available to determine student satisfaction with their overall college experience and their likelihood to persist (Lang & Powers, 2011).

Simply put, persistence can be defined as all continuous actions taken by a student towards degree completion. While necessary, persistence in and of itself is not a sufficient condition to predict degree completion (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Relevant research indicates that academic performance, like grade point average (GPA), is a powerful predictor of persistence and degree attainment (Adelman, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Voelkle & Sander, 2008). This is a logical indicator as GPA indicates a student's involvement and commitment to academic endeavors; thus, a cumulative GPA reflects the totality of the credit hours expressed in a quantifiable manner. According to Astin (1975), the extent of student involvement is decided by physical and psychological energy dedicated to academic activities and differs from motivation because involvement incorporates both the psychological and behavioral characteristics of action. Retention, on the other hand reflects the collective efforts an institution exerts to sustain student enrollment from admission to graduation.

There are many theories in addition to Astin's on student involvement that explore the outcome of student persistence in college. Most dominant are Vincent Tinto's (1993) academic and social integration model and Bean and Metzner's (1985) non-traditional student attrition study. Attrition is defined as the failure of a student to reenroll at the same institution for consecutive terms. While Tinto's model investigates institutional departure primarily from a student perspective, the Bean and Metzner model examines the same phenomenon from an institutional causation point of view. Tinto's (1993) theory of student persistence and retention presumes that students arrive to college from a variety of backgrounds, economic situations, academic readiness, and with their

individual set of skills, abilities and commitments. According to Tinto, a student's

commitment to success is either bolstered or diminished depending upon their ability to

become academically and socially integrated (Tinto, 1975). Tinto's theory revolves

around the constant interaction between students and various members of the institution

they attend, primarily faculty. Tinto argues that a student's intention and commitment to

educational goals corresponds to their overall likelihood to persist and that from an

institutional perspective, academic and socialization indicators such as adjustment,

academic difficulty, incongruence, and isolation are negative factors that lead to student

departure (Tinto, 1993).

In the 2011 Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) report titled

Veterans in Higher Education, David DiRamio and Kathryn Jarvis adapt Tinto's model

to the student veteran population. In the chapter Transition 2.0, the authors hypothesize

that deliberate actions on the part of college administrators to bring student veterans

together are desirable (DiRamio & Spires, 2009). As illustrated in figure 1.1,

institutional experiences for the academic and social systems can be constructed on

campuses to facilitate the transition and integration of student veterans to campus life.

The scope of actions contemplated range from specially designed orientation classes

exclusively for veterans to informal connections with faculty members with prior service

experience. Creating less formal social relationships with other students who have

similar experiences is a natural method of helping non-traditional students adapt to

college.

Figure 1.1: Adaptation of Tinto's Longitudinal Model of Institutional Departure

Adaption of Tinto's Longitudinal Model of Institutional Departure for Student Veterans
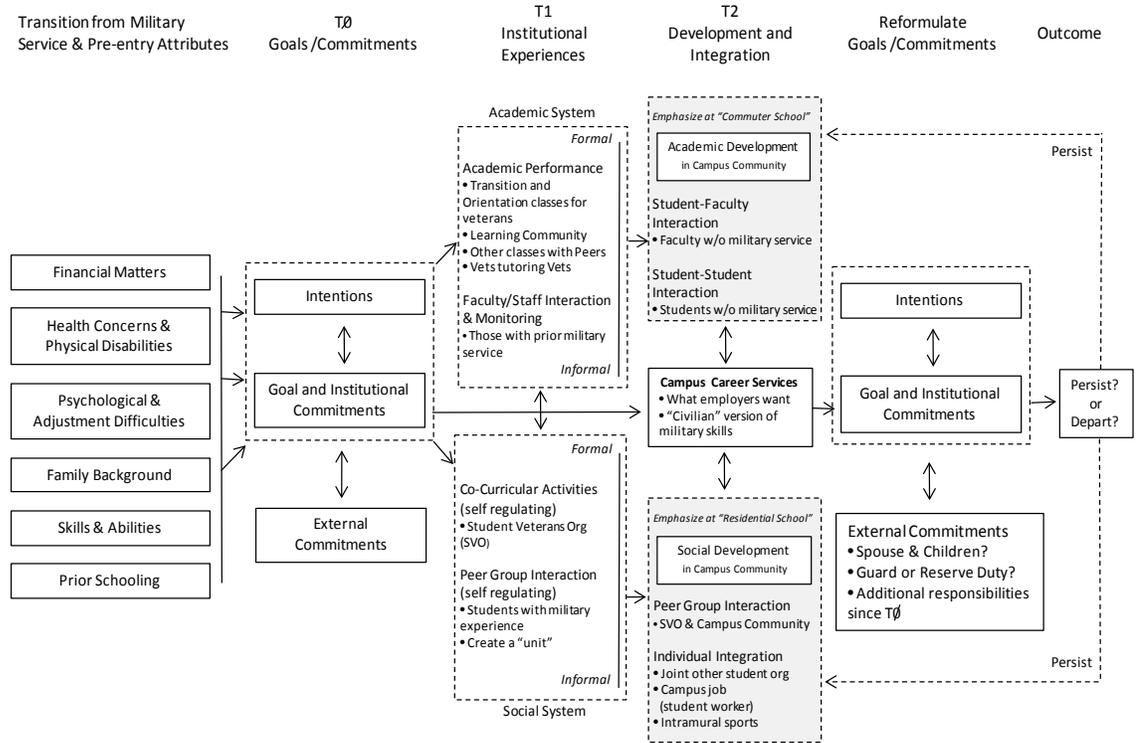
Source: DiRamio, D., & Jarvis, K. (2011). *Veterans in Higher Education: When Johnny and Jane Come Marching to Campus: ASHE Higher Education Report*. J-B Ashe Higher Education Report Series. Wiley. p. 37.

DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) cautioned that segregating strategies if carried to the extreme could be detrimental to the essential integration of student veterans into the broader "civilian" campus community. Research on student persistence indicates that if a student fails to integrate both academically and socially with the broader campus community, he or she is more likely to depart the institution (Braxton & Lien, 2000;

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Tinto, 1993, 1997). Since the VBCS program is a short- term academic remediation program, the like-minded socialization aspect of the program is likely a desirable byproduct. One objective of this study is to determine whether or not there is any long term effect on a student veteran's persistence given this forced social integration.

Within the academic system of this adaptive model resides the impetus for creating student veteran learning communities to strengthen student commitment. Rendón's (1993) validation theory emphasizes the importance of personal validation and its effect on the academic performance of non-traditional students. Rendón suggested that active forms of validation are needed to encourage nontraditional students to persist. Validation, Rendón suggests, must begin in the early stages of a student's academic program, ideally through instructors and student peer engagement (Rendón, 1994). Rendón's research revealed that non-traditional students communicated doubts about their ability to succeed, and through validation, they develop confidence in their ability to learn and gain a heightened sense of self-worth. Success, especially within their first year, was related to whether students became involved in institutional life, and that validation could impact vulnerable nontraditional students (Rendón 1993, 1994). If true, then validation could be a necessity that precedes, as well as impacts, student involvement. This leads to the exploration of learning communities as a viable academic and social environment where students can develop a support system and increase their sense of validation (Rendón 1993, 2002; Tinto 1997, 2000).

Cohorts and Learning Communities

Tinto (1987) argued that retention is incumbent upon the strength of a student's educational and career goals and each institution must help students recognize that reality, with faculty playing a primary role. In 1993, Tinto and Goodsell stressed the important of integrating social and academic experiences early on to preclude social affiliations from undercutting academics and lessening the likelihood of first year completion. This implies that students must find an institution that match their "intellectual orientation" in terms of programs, teaching styles, faculty and student interaction, and peer support rather than one well known for its social activities.

In describing learning communities, Tinto (2000) primarily defines them as linked courses where the same group of students co-register in a cluster of classes for an entire semester. However, there are many variations of learning communities to include those where students reside together and others where collaboration occurs across the curriculum. Creating learning communities requires institutions to dedicate blocks of linked classes, promote the community concept by creating both social and academic opportunities within the curriculum, and foster a sense of belonging. The planning for this may reside in multiple offices and requires effective crosstalk and leadership. Honors programs are good examples of learning communities that are on nearly every campus and have proven records of effective student engagement. Other learning communities may involve student organizations such as ROTC, Greek communities, and athletic groups.

Tinto's research indicated that students benefit from learning communities in four ways: they extend the students' support network, students participate in their learning more, the quality of student learning increases, and students become more engaged in campus life and their educational experience. While learning communities are neither a panacea nor the right fit for all student and faculty situations, they are a valuable method for promoting student success and retention provided they are measured for effectiveness.

Empirical evidence supports the notion that strong peer group identification, particularly interactions outside the classroom that reinforce in-class concepts or initiatives, can bolster academic success. Thus, interactions among peers may be as influential as the experiences in a college classroom (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Factors that influence peer group identification include size, homogeneity, isolation, and group attitudes (Milem, 1998; Newcomb & Wilson, 1966).

Building strong bonds within a group is essential to learning, and that concept was mastered long ago by the military. When reporting to basic training new enlistees are immediately assigned to a platoon and given a platoon sergeant who shapes the unit into a precision team; fostering dependence upon peers to achieve success – survival and graduation. This bond grows even stronger when a unit experiences true survival in a combat zone and the individual service member's life depends totally in the trust they have in their team.

It is logical to see why social and academic integration requires the development of a certain sense of community if a student is to see the classroom as anything more than just a point in time event. When the sense of purpose is group centered, the success of

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the group itself fosters a sense of belonging, group identification and self-esteem. In the military unit, identify is powerful and provides the strength needed to overcome great adversity. The ledger of Medal of Honor recipient exploits describe the sacrifices many men have given to save the lives of their peers.

Given this understanding of military culture, some veterans' programs at colleges across the country have taken to creating all-veteran classes to capitalize on the natural bond that exist among those who have served, creating a unit mentality and a sense of cohesion among peers. One example that has proven successful is the Supportive Education for Returning Veteran (SERV) program established by Dr. John Schupp at Cleveland State University in Ohio. Students enrolled in SERV demonstrated higher GPAs than their non-veteran peers and retention rates above the school's average (Schupp, 2010).

Research supports the use of GPA as a crucial indicator of a student's involvement in their college education. Not surprisingly, research continuously shows that the higher the student's GPA the more likely degree completion will occur (Budden, Hsing, Budden, & Hall, 2010; Voelkle & Sander, 2008; Wang, 2009). A second primary factor is the enrollment pattern which indicates that persistence and graduation are less likely to occur among part-time students (Chen, 2007). Overall, the research confirms Bean's 1982 model that identifies college GPA as a significant predictor of student persistence (Crockem, 2008; Voelkle & Sander, 2008; Wang, 2009). In 1985, Bean and Metzner hypothesized that GPA would be a factor in persistence and confirmed that in their 1987 study. Many other studies also support their conclusion (Farabaugh-Dorkins,

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1991; Kasworm, 1990; McCaffrey, 1989; Mercer, 1993; St. John & Starkey, 1995, Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Adelman, 2006).

Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) in a study of students of all ages found that a high GPA was positively associated with persistence. Crockem (2008) sampled 2000 first-time freshmen at a Texas open admissions university and found that first-semester GPA and number of hours attempted were significant predictors of persistence in the first year. The same study also identified that college readiness was not a significant predictor of persistence (Crockem, 2008).

As cited in Lang and Powers, research conducted by DePaul University (2010) using a sample of a first-year non-traditional cohort found significant variance in retention based upon GPA – 85.6% retention for students with a GPA greater than 3.0, 80% for those with GPAs between 2.0 and 2.49, and 46.9% for those with less than a 2.0. The same report documented a significant relationship between high GPAs and graduation rates. In the DePaul study, students with a GPA greater than 3.0 had the highest graduation rate at 77.4%, while those with below a 2.0 graduated at just 13.3% (Lang & Powers, 2011).

When looking at national data, Adelman (2006) found that college GPAs that fall into the first two quintiles increase the possibility that a student will earn a degree by nearly 22 percent. Adelman also found that performance during the second year was a good indicator that a student will complete a bachelor's degree (Adelman, 2006). Finally, Adelman found that students who lag in their first year struggle in their second year and are more likely to drop-out in a period of 8.5 years (Adelman, 2006).

Furthermore, National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2009) data showed that **t**he greater the level of student involvement the higher the GPA and the greater likelihood that the student would reenroll for the following term, confirming Tinto's argument that highly-engaged students are more likely to persist than less-engaged students (NSSE, 2009).

In the latest national survey, NSSE (2010) again revealed a direct link between campus involvement in both academic and non-academic offerings with retention. Interestingly, NSSE also highlighted the need for campuses to adapt retention efforts to the specific needs of the student veteran population and noted that student veterans reported lower levels of campus support than non-veterans (Lang & Powers, 2011).

While most data support GPA as a significant factor, Shields (1994) found no effect from GPA on persistence among adult students. As adult learners tend to have a strong commitment to their studies, Shields hypothesized that higher GPAs would not likely be a significant predictor of adult student persistence. Albeit, the majority of the research supports the notion that GPA is one of the most powerful predictors of student persistence to graduation especially when it rises year to year. Adelman's research indicates that the likelihood of graduating doubles for students with rising GPAs as compared to students who have lower GPAs going forward. In fact, a higher GPA is one of the most powerful indicators of persistence, only next to a full-time enrollment as the top indicator (Adelman, 2006). Thus, any study looking at comparable persistence indicators should include GPA data to be considered credible.

Substantive Findings

In examining the overall literature regarding student persistent, it is clear that there is no best model that effectively identifies why students fail to persist. Of all the theories, Tinto's theory of student departure is the most often cited work, with more than 775 citations, making it the predominant theory in the field (Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2004). Other scholars have suggested that Tinto's theory best fits traditional residential campuses and that non-traditional, adult and commuter student populations are not fully represented by the model (Cabrera, Nora & Castaneda, 1993; Nora, 2001; Tierney, 2001). Bean and Metzner (1985) suggest that Tinto's model over-states the impact of socialization, reflecting that nontraditional and adult students' characteristics such as family obligations, work, rate of enrollment, and age significantly reduce the impact of social interactions on the retention of the non-traditional populations.

Bean and Metzner (1985) distinguish between direct and indirect variable that influence the decision to drop out, finding four variables that have significant influence: prior academic performance, intent to leave, defined goals, and environmental factors such as hours worked, support, responsibility for others, and credit for prior learning. The intent to leave factor relates to psychological factors such as commitment to the goal, program satisfaction, and overall stress. They also found that academic variables such as advising, course availability and study habits have a positive impact. In their theory, social integration is only a marginal influence on a students' decision to leave an institution or persist.

Modeling nontraditional and adult student attrition is difficult due to the heterogeneous nature of the population (Metzner & Bean, 1987). Overall, research supports the premise that adult students persist at lower rates than traditional age students (Justice & Dornan, 2001; National Attitudes Report, 2008). Adult students arrive in higher education with varying academic backgrounds; some may be returning to college after being away for several years and may require refresher or remedial assistance to become academically ready (Bergman, 2012). One rather unanimous belief by most scholars is that adult learners tend to be highly pragmatic in their approach to their educational goals (Thomas & Chickering, 1984). Adult students, in particular, exhibit a more problem-centered or skills development focus in the formal academic environment (Horn,1998).

This philosophy holds true for student veterans as well. Their experience in the military tends to make them mission focused and may influence their approach to getting into and through higher education in this manner. However, because higher education does not adhere to the highly structured, authoritarian paradigm of military training design, student veterans struggle in making the transition to the civilian learning environment. Thus, while student veterans can be categorized as a non-traditional student population, they are unique in many ways to include willingly embracing group identification and the affiliated social integration aspects of unit cohesion. Research findings from other studies confirm that positive involvement with peers and faculty encourages adult students to persist (New England Adult Research Network, 1999; Tinto, 1998). Non-traditional student populations seek out more active learning, in part because

they are internally motivated, more self-directed, and problem-centered experiential learners (Knowles, Swanson & Holton, 2011). In fact, Horn (1998) found that students who were isolated from university resources and other students were less likely to persist.

Implications

The overall review of the literature reveals many theories and research devoted to persistence of students and developmental education in general but less in regard to academic learning communities and student veteran populations in particular. While Tinto's model may not be as applicable to non-traditional students as Bean and Metzner would prefer, there is considerable evidence that adult learners must be actively engaged and feel supported in their academic goals if they are to persist. Astin's theory of student involvement (1984) and Rendón's theory of validation (1993) both reinforce the concept that students need affirmation that the end they seek is worth the current effort in terms of time and resources. DiRamio's and Jarvis's Transition 2.0 adaption of Tinto's model is a reasonable variation that attempts to address the retention variables associated with student veterans.

Perhaps the most revealing observation was made by Bean and Metzner when they postulated that modeling nontraditional and adult student attrition is difficult due to the heterogeneous nature of the population (Metzner & Bean, 1987). Isolating the external factors is difficult and perhaps more so for student veterans, who have their own set of unique factors to include transitions from the service to civilian life, coping with consequence of service, and adapting to the college environment. This study assumed that all veterans are equally affected by the same set of external variables and sought to

look at the internal aspect of the VBCS offering. By limiting the study to just comparing

the student veteran population, the results, while limited in scope, should provide some

insight as to the value of the VBCS program's effect on retention of the non-college

ready population of student veterans.

Determining if there is indeed a best practice for dealing with academic

deficiencies is difficult. As noted previously, college attainment literature finds that test

scores like the ACT and high school grades are important predictors of first-year college

performance; however, that relationship diminishes over time in college. Such

background factors become less important predictors of persistence while faculty-student

interaction, relationships, and engagement become more relevant (Pascarella &Terenzini,

2001; Hurtado, 1997; Ishitani & Desjardins, 2002), confirming that positive involvement

with peers and faculty encourages adult students to persist (New England Adult Research

Network, 1999; Tinto, 1998).

Contributions

The purpose of this study was to determine whether the Veterans Bridge to

College Success (VBCS) pilot program offered to incoming new student veterans with

academic deficiencies had any lasting effect on the persistence or academic success of

students enrolled in the program and the corresponding why or why not. The value of

this research resides in great part to the need to be good stewards of resources, but most

importantly, in determining whether or not a bridge program like VBCS can truly help

student veterans persist to graduation. In the end, it is the objective of this study to add to

the body of knowledge regarding the value of cohort-based learning community based

instruction as it relates to the student veteran population.

Summary

The literature review for this study focused on three areas of broad academic

research: retention and persistence theory, developmental education, and learning

communities. The modified model of Tinto's Longitudinal Model for Institutional

Departure as adapted by David DiRamio and Kathryn Jarvis provides the framework for

analyzing both academic and social systems constructed to facilitate the transition and

integration of student veterans to campus life. In this study, academic and social

integration occur simultaneously through a cohort learning community specifically

designed for student veterans who are not academically ready at the time of admission.

As stated by the National Association of Developmental Education (NADE), roughly 58

percent of all community college students and 23 percent of all bachelor's degree seeking

students nationally take at least one developmental education course in college (NADE,

2009).

To mitigate the influence of external variables expressed by Bean and Metzner,

this study focused exclusively on comparing student veterans within the VBCS control

group and non-cohort student veterans who entered the same academic institution at the

same time, but were deemed academic proficient at the time of admission. Based upon

the preponderance of the literature, cumulative GPA is considered the most relevant

predictor of persistence. It was posited that statistical analyses of the performance of

both groups would ultimately reveal whether the study group performs worse, as well as,

or better than their academically proficient peers. These analyses served as the

foundation for the remainder of the study as outline in the methods section.

Chapter 3

Methods

University Context

Discharged military personnel are a growing population on college campuses

nationwide as the wars of the post 9-11 era subside. A significant number of these student

veterans seek to use their veteran education benefits to transition from military service

into the civilian workforce. Some student veterans come into the college environment

academically prepared but others have academic deficiencies expressed in the established

criteria for college admission, most typically no or low standardized test scores such as

the ACT or SAT, or low high school grade point averages. Both groups face many

obstacles to success that reside outside of the university context, but those who enter

must deal with the caldron of academic and social integration. This study is unique in

that it seeks to examine the long term effect of a bridge program designed to remediate

academic deficiencies for student veterans in a university setting. In most cases,

traditional four-year institutions require students to remediate academic deficiencies

before being admitted. The federally funded Veterans Upward Bound (VUB) program,

of which there are only 48 nationwide, is a Trio program specifically designed to address

this shortcoming, albeit in only 48 locations across the country. As previously stated,

much of this remediation occurs at the community college level where 42% of student

veterans are studying. Thus, the Veterans Bridge to College Success pilot program is

unique, and the outcomes of this program are worth examination.

EKU Student Veteran Context

Eastern Kentucky University (EKU) has a long history of supporting military veterans dating back to the establishment of the Army Reserve Officer Training Corps program at the university in 1936. After World War II, EKU embraced returning discharged veterans, as did most public universities. During the height of the Vietnam conflict in 1972, Eastern one of the largest ROTC programs, third only in size to the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York and Texas A&M University. In 2009, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) college presidents focused their annual meeting on the impact of the passage of the Post 9-11 GI Bill making its way through the United States Congress. The outcome of the conference was the conclusion colleges and universities needed to be prepared for the rapid growth of student veterans they are currently experiencing. In the fall term of 2010, Eastern Kentucky University had approximately 680 student veterans and dependents attending the university. Bu the fall of 2013 semester, that enrollment had grown to over 1300. EKU also serves a region of Appalachia with high school graduation and college readiness rates below the national average. Thusly, as EKU anticipated, a large number of the student veterans leaving the service and returning to Kentucky would need academic transition assistance. EKU's leadership, embracing the need to serve veterans more effectively, established the Office of Military and Veterans Affairs and launched Operation Veteran Success to meet this need.

Veterans Bridge to College Success (VBCS) Context

One aspect of the Operation Veteran Success was the creation of the Veterans Bridge to College Success (VBCS) pilot program that uses placement exam scores to determine the admissibility of veterans with low standardized test scores, no test scores, or sub-standard high school or college GPAs. As a condition of their admission to EKU student veterans who enter through the VBCS program are placed in a veteran-only learning cohort. Students are required to enroll in a Transition to College course (GSD 101V) that is specifically tailored to address student veteran transition needs and is taught by faculty members who are themselves military veterans. The transition to college course includes information on campus and community veterans' service, adjusting to civilian life, and coping with consequences of service, and serves as the principal catalyst for these veterans' social integration into higher education. Many of these student veterans attend refresher math, English and reading courses together, as determined by the results of their placement exam. After the first term, VBCS students may take one or two remaining refresher or full-credit courses with other student veterans depending upon their academic needs. By their third term they are taking non-cohort classes in their individual major or other general education requirements alongside the general student population. In most cases, by the end of the first academic year, VBCS students have completed their remediation requirements and have been fully integrated into the mainstream of student life with no mandated follow up or forced social integration with their veteran peers.

Unit of Study

The unit of study is the population of student veterans that were admitted as first time freshmen to EK during the 2010-11 academic school year and who were enrolled in the VBCS program. The academic school year is defined as both Fall 2010 and Spring 2011. Part-time and transfer students were not included in the study to protect the validity of the research, particularly so with transfer students who might have significant college experience that would have skewed the results. To be considered for the study (VBCS) group, student veterans must have successfully completed their remediation by the beginning of the third academic term; thus, all students in both groups were comprised of only those student veterans who persisted to the third academic semester. Likewise, the control group consisted of new first time student veterans who enrolled at EKU during the 2010-2011 academic school year, were not part-time nor transfer students, and persisted into their third academic term. The study specifically excludes consideration of the first two semesters when the study group (VBCS) was pursing remedial non-credit bearing coursework. During these terms, VBCS student's GPAs would only reflect the part-time credit-bearing courses; therefore, in order to effectively compare the two groups it was deemed appropriate to begin the comparison at the third term when the VBCS and control groups were considered fully academically prepared and pursuing their degrees at a full-time rate. The study was intentionally restricted to comparison of student veterans in both the cohort (VBCS) and non-cohort control group. The elimination of non-veterans from the control group was done to enhance the validity of the research by insuring that both groups were as similar as possible execpt for the

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need for remediation and the VBCS cohort experience. Because of the small population size, the study was unable to go beyond the student veteran level in the aggregate to conduct comparisons based upon type of service, branch of service, or other differentiating factors.

The objective of the study was to discern whether participation in the VBCS program significantly affected the persistence of study group members as compared to their non-cohort student veteran peers. The study utilized quantitative and qualitative analyses to determine whether student veterans with known academic deficiencies prior to enrollment persist and perform at similar rates as their academically proficient peers and examine whether their academic and social cohort experience in the VBCS program had any lasting impact upon their persistence.

Study Approval

Before the research began, approval was obtained from the Institutional Research Board (IRB) who approved the study (Appendix C) after completion of Social and Behavioral Research and Responsible Conduct Training.

Study Population

The study group consisted of new first time freshmen student veterans who enrolled at EKU in either the Fall 2010 or Spring 2011 terms, participated in the VBCS program, and successfully completed their academic remediation and returned for a third term (N = 17). The control group consisted of new first time student veterans who enrolled at EKU in the same two terms as the study group, did not require academic remediation, and returned for a third term (N=15). The final populations included all

student veterans who met the decision rules of the study. Since VBCS is a campus based

program, student veterans who enrolled in online only educational programs were also

excluded. Because of the many exclusions used to achieve purity in comparison, the

study population size is relatively small. These exclusions were considered knowing in

advance that they would limit the ability generalize the results; however, it was

considered appropriate given the need to move forward with research that would be

useful to the higher education community and could serve as an effective foundation for a

more extensive longitudinal study including subsequent year groups or in partnership

with other institutions that might choose to offer such programming.

Research Design

The study included both quantitative analysis of student academic achievement

and retention alongside a qualitative assessment of what motivated students in both

groups to persist. Quantitative statistical tools included means comparisons and

independent sample *t*-tests. Because the quantitative data already existed at the outset of

this study, the study employed an ex post facto design using previously achieved results

as opposed to monitoring student progress within the current term.

In determining the criteria for the study, credence was given to the Graduation

Probability Indices (GPI)™ research project piloted by Operation College Promise and

the Pat Tillman Foundation. The GPI™ includes factors commonly used to evaluate

traditional student persistence such as grade point averages, percent of students earning

all credits pursued, and term-to-term retention rates. The GPI™ was developed with

input from national organizations such as the American Council on Education (ACE), the

Association of American State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) and, Service members Opportunity Consortium (SOC), as well as the input of partner institutions (Lang & Powers, 2011). The GPI™ index also included variables such as the percent of veterans utilizing campus services like academic counseling, participation in the Student Veterans' Organization (SVO) and, utilization of the Veterans Resource Center and other services as deemed applicable by the institutions participating in its development. Since several of these variables are not relevant to this study, the GPI™ was not used but was considered when choosing criteria for the quantitative analyses.

Phase two of the study used phenomenological methods. Specifically, focus group interviews were conducted to obtain a deeper understanding of the guiding research questions. Selection of participants for focus groups was limited to VBCS and control group students (N=4,4) who remained enrolled at EKU into their 5th academic term and agreed to participate in the interviews. Students were randomly selected and asked to participate until there were four members in each group. Utilizing small focus groups was chosen for this phase of the study to provide a broader spectrum of data for analysis. Three to six participants is considered acceptable given the population size (Saldana, 2011).

Guiding Questions

Two overarching questions were developed to guide the study. Question 1 was explored through quantitative methods to search for statistical differences. Question 2 continued the research to examine the student veterans' experience through qualitative investigation.

Q1. How did participant's in the VBCS study group and non-VBCS control group perform based upon the following indicators of academic success: term GPA, credits passed rates during a student's third and fourth academic terms, and rate of retention from the third to the fifth academic term? Based upon these indicators, does academic performance and retention rate of students who continued their degree programs after completing VBCS differ significantly from college-ready student veteran peers who did not participate in a cohort-based educational program?

Q2. Do the academic and social integration experiences of both groups differ, and did VBCS students note any lasting effect of the integration achieved by VBCS on their academic performance or desire to persist in subsequent semesters?

Quantitative Research Questions

Based on these guiding questions, the research quantitative questions for this study were:

1) Does the mean term GPA among student veterans remediated through VBCS differ from non-VBCS veterans' GPA during their third and fourth academic terms?

2) Does the mean percentage of credits earned by VBCS participants differ from non-VBCS veterans' number passed during their third and fourth academic terms?

3) Does the mean retention rate to the fifth term of former VBCS participants differ from the non-VBCS veterans' retention rate?

Hypotheses

Based on the research questions above, the following hypotheses were tested:

H1. There will be no significant difference in term GPA between the student veterans who participated in VBCS and student veterans who did not participate.

H2. There will be no significant difference between the credits passed rates of former VBCS student veterans and non-VBCS student veterans.

H3. There will be no significant difference in retention rates to the fifth term of former VBCS student veterans and non-VBCS student veterans.

Quantitative Methods

The independent variable for this study yielded two groups. Students enrolled in VBCS were coded (1), and non-VBCS students were coded (2). Dependent variables were the student veterans' term grade point average (GPA) divided into third and fourth terms, class pass or failure for the same terms, and retention (0=No, 1=Yes) of VBCS (1) and non-VBCS (2) students into their fifth academic term.

To be included in the study, the student must have been coded as a veteran (VE) or Reserve/Guard (RG) in EKU's database (Banner). Students were only selected if they were also coded as new first time freshmen attending full time. Data were then exported from EKU's Banner record system and converted into SSPS (19.0) for analysis.

The quantitative component of this study employed a causal comparative research design consisting of three independent samples t-test comparing the mean term GPA for VBCS (1) and non-VBCS (2) student groups, the mean percentage of classes passed

between both groups, and the mean percentage of student veterans retained in both groups.

Qualitative Methods

The sample for phase two of the study consisted of two focus group chosen randomly from the students who were retained into their fifth term until a sufficient number (N=4) was attained for each group; VBCS and non-VBCS new first time freshmen. The qualitative component of this study was a phenomenological one.

The two focus groups met separately for one hour each. The focus groups occurred in March 2013 shortly after mid-terms during the student fifth or sixth academic term, depending upon the individual's university (EKU) start dates, which were either Fall 2010 or Spring 2011. Both focus groups met in a conference room setting within the Student Services Building at EKU. Each group was asked the same set of questions related to academic and social integration (Appendix B). The VBCS group was asked an additional final question related to their overall evaluation of the VBCS program at the end of the session. Since the researcher is a veteran and was formally involved with the program, a third party facilitator was retained from EKU's Facilitation Center to conduct the focus group interviews. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. A coded analysis was completed for each group. The focus group interviews followed a semi-structured protocol with integrated follow-up questions interjected only for clarification purposes. Individual follow-up interviews were planned if the need arose for further clarification, but these were not deemed necessary.

Recording and Archiving

Following the focus group interview, the field notes and recording transcripts were typed and collated into a master document. This document was used to highlight pronounced statements and ideas. These field notes served as the source for identifying emergent themes throughout the data analysis process. To avoid introduction of errors into the transcription, EKU's Faculty Senate Recorder was retained to complete a verbatim transcription of the focus group recordings. The recorder was instructed to keep clean up of conversational language to a minimum to avoid interjection of bias into the transcriptions. All research materials were kept in a secure location that was only accessible to the researcher.

Ethical Issues

Successful focus group interviews depend upon establishing a certain level of trust between the interviewer/researcher and the participants, as well as the avoidance of injecting bias into the interview. In this study, the researcher had a working relationship with many of the participants, serving as the Associate Director for Veterans Affairs at EKU. This familiarity and previously established relationships helped create a bond of trust that aided the researcher in gathering participants for the study. Because of this familiarity and the desire to avoid injecting personal bias into the process, the researcher attended each focus group meeting only long enough to introduce the facilitator and transcriptionist and to explain why they would be conducting the interview. Participants were asked to provide candid and forthright comments and were made aware that the

researcher would be reading the transcription and listening to the audio tape to validate the process as well as interpret the results.

Another reason for employing a skilled facilitator was the small sample size. Given the small number of participants, an expert was used to manage the dynamics of power and influence which might permit a single participant or the interviewer from dominating the group. The facilitator was cognizant of this factor and worked to keep student discussion balanced among the individual participants. While the topics of academic and social integration were unlikely to cause undue stress, the facilitator was instructed to monitor the group for stress and to stop and allow participants to decide whether to continue or end the interview should such an event occur. The intent of this action was to avoid creating a negative reaction that could harm the student or taint the research. The facilitator reported no such concerns at the conclusion of both interviews. As a precaution, EKU's Counseling Center, located in the same building, was notified in advance of the study and when it was to take place.

Analytical Process

Memoing served as a written transcription of the researcher's thoughts to help chronicle the ongoing conceptualization of the research and was used throughout the qualitative phase of the study from coding to analysis. Methodological memoing helped retain the focus on the intended outcomes of the study. Subsequent to transcription and prior to coding, a review of relevant literature occurred to identify known salient issues to help the researcher identify emergent themes and new issues. Coding was the process of identifying words or phrases that captured the meaning or essence of the transcribed

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observation or interview. Open coding followed by axial coding served as the basis for establishing sub-clusters and formed the basis from which analysis began.

Limitations of Study

A major limitation of this study was the scope of the work. While valuable to the body of knowledge, the VBCS program may not be readily replicable at the community college level where most academic remediation occurs, where there may not be the volume of students nor staff support for such a program. While standard metrics such as GPA, retention, and class failure rates are used to compare academic outcomes, variables such as different class subjects, different majors, and different professors that may have bearing on the results were not considered. The study did not control for possible variance in the level of remediation needed within members of the VBCS group, meaning those with significant needs and those with minor remediation needs are treated equally. The study's small population size also precluded examination of other military service related variables such as length of service, combat experience, reserve or active component comparisons, as well as race and gender. Albeit, the validity of the study was enhanced by exclusion of non-veterans due to the need to isolate as many variables as possible in order to obtain a valid analysis of the VBCS's effect on student outcomes. Despite the limitations, the study does advance the knowledge of cohort bridge programming and its value to student veteran academic performance and persistence.

Controlling for Bias

An obvious concern in this study is the fact that the primary researcher is a former military officer and served in the capacity as the Associate Director for Veterans Affairs

responsible for the VBCS program. Precautions were taken particularly with the collection of focus group input in order to limit introduction of unintended bias into the qualitative portion of the study. Additionally, the researcher called upon two outside directors of Veteran Resource Centers, both former military officers, to review the results and findings for biased conclusions. Both directors supported the researcher's interpretations and expressed appreciation for value the study brings to the knowledge base regarding effective veterans' support services.

Study Boundaries

The scope of this study was specifically narrow, examining only the results of a specialized bridge program offered at Eastern Kentucky University, a four-year regional public university. Bean and Metzner suggest that external environment factors have a detrimental effect on adult learner persistence (Bean, 1982; Bean & Metzner, 1985). Measures related to psychological and environmental factors such as satisfaction, post-traumatic stress, financial assistance, and emotional support from family were intentionally excluded. By narrowing the study to student veterans at the same institution, the study assumed that these external environmental factors would be equally distributed across the student veteran population and would be found at similar ratios in both the study (VBCS) and control (non-VBCS) groups.

Chapter 4

Results and Findings

Objective

   This chapter begins with a review of the studies purpose and methods. The

primary objective of the study was to discern whether participation in the VBCS program

had a significant effect on the academic success and persistence of study group members

as compared to their non-cohort student veteran peers. The study included dual analyses

to determine whether student veterans with known academic deficiencies prior to

enrollment persisted and performed at similar rates as their academically proficient peers

and whether their academic and social cohort experience in the VBCS program exerted a

lasting impact upon their persistence.

Guiding Questions

   Two overarching questions were developed to guide the study. Question 1 was

explored through quantitative methods to search for statistical differences. Question 2

continued the research to examine the student veterans' experience through qualitative

investigation.

Q1. How did participant's in the VBCS study group and non-VBCS control group

perform based upon the following indicators of academic success: term GPA, credits

passed rates during a student's third and fourth academic terms, and rate of retention

from the third to the fifth academic term? Based upon these indicators, does academic

performance and retention rate of students who continued their degree programs after

completing VBCS differ significantly from college-ready student veteran peers who did not participate in a cohort-based educational program?

Q2. Do the academic and social integration experiences of both groups differ, and did VBCS students note any lasting effect of the integration achieved by VBCS on their academic performance or desire to persist in subsequent semesters?

Unit of Study

The unit of study is the population of student veterans that were admitted as first time freshmen to EKU during the 2010-11 academic school year and who were enrolled in the VBCS program. The academic school year is defined as both Fall 2010 and Spring 2011. Part-time and transfer students were not included in the study to protect the validity of the research, particularly so with transfer students who might have significant college experience that would have skewed the results. To be considered for the study (VBCS) group, student veterans must have successfully completed their remediation by the beginning of the third academic term; thus, all students in both groups were comprised of only those student veterans who persisted to the third academic semester. Likewise, the control group consisted of new first time student veterans who enrolled at EKU during the 2010-2011 academic school year, were not part-time nor transfer students, and persisted into their third academic term. The study specifically excludes consideration of the first two semesters when the study group (VBCS) was pursing remedial non-credit bearing coursework. During these terms, VBCS student's GPAs would only reflect the part-time credit-bearing courses; therefore, in order to effectively compare the two groups it was deemed appropriate to begin the comparison at the third

term when the VBCS and control groups were considered fully academically prepared and pursuing their degrees at a full-time rate. The study was intentionally restricted to comparison of student veterans in both the cohort (VBCS) and non-cohort control group. The elimination of non-veterans from the control group was done to enhance the validity of the research by insuring that both groups were as similar as possible except for the need for remediation and the VBCS cohort experience. Because of the small population size, the study was unable to go beyond the student veteran level in the aggregate to conduct comparisons based upon type of service, branch of service, or other differentiating factors.

The objective of the study was to discern whether participation in the VBCS program significantly affected the persistence of study group members as compared to their non-cohort student veteran peers. The study utilized quantitative analyses to determine whether student veterans with known academic deficiencies prior to enrollment persist and perform at similar rates as their academically proficient peers along with qualitative analyses to examine whether their academic and social cohort experience in the VBCS program had any lasting impact upon their persistence.

Quantitative Methods

The independent variable for this study yielded two groups. Students enrolled in VBCS were coded (1), and non-VBCS students were coded (2). Dependent variables were the student veterans' term grade point average (GPA) divided into third and fourth terms, class pass or failure for the same terms, and retention (0=No, 1=Yes) of VBCS (1) and non-VBCS (2) students into their fifth academic term.

To be included in the study, the student must have been coded as a veteran (VE) or Reserve/Guard (RG) in EKU's database (Banner). Students were only selected if they were also coded as new first time freshmen attending full time. Data were then exported from EKU's Banner record system and converted into SSPS (19.0) for analysis.

The quantitative component of this study employed a causal comparative research design consisting of three independent samples t-test comparing the mean term GPA for VBCS (1) and non-VBCS (2) student groups, the mean percentage of classes passed between both groups, and the mean percentage of student veterans retained in both groups. The independent samples t-test is a statistical technique that is used to analyze the mean difference between two independent groups. The technique was used to draw conclusions about the means of the two student veteran populations, and used to tell whether or not they were similar. The test assumes that the dependent variable is normally distributed, the samples are independent of each other and the dependent variables are measured on an interval or ratio level scale (Agresti & Finlay, 2008). Significance for the independent sample t-tests for this study was determined at the $\alpha=.05$ level.

Study Population

The study group consisted of new first time freshmen student veterans who enrolled at EKU in either the Fall 2010 or Spring 2011 terms, participated in the VBCS program, and successfully completed their academic remediation and returned for a third term (N = 17). The control group consisted of new first time student veterans who enrolled at EKU in the same two terms as the study group, did not require academic

remediation, and returned for a third term (N=15). The final population included all student veterans who met the decision rules of the study. Since VBCS is a campus based program, student veterans who enrolled in online only educational programs were also excluded. Because of the many exclusions used to achieve purity in comparison, the study population size is relatively small. These exclusions were considered knowing in advance that they would limit the ability to generalize the results; however, it was considered appropriate given the need to move forward with research that would be useful to the higher education community and could serve as an effective foundation for a more extensive longitudinal study including subsequent year groups or in partnership with other institutions that might choose to offer such programming.

To protect the identity of the participants, the researcher employed Creswell's (2007) recommendation, "A researcher protects the anonymity of the informants, for example, by assigning numbers or aliases to individuals and develops case studies of individuals that represent a composite picture rather than an individual picture" (p. 141). The four participants in the VBCS study group were all male and composed of 3 former Army enlisted soldiers and one Marine. All members had served on active duty, and two had also served in the Guard or Reserves. Only one member had served a deployment. Three of the four participants in the non-VBCS group were male and were composed of one former Army enlisted soldier, two members of the Army National Guard, and a former Navy seaman. Only one member of this group had served on a deployment as well. All of the participants in both groups were Caucasian, which is representative of EKU where enrollment is 93 percent Caucasian.

Phase One – Quantitative Research Questions and Hypotheses Results

Question 1

The first research question and hypothesis for this study were:

1) Does the mean term GPA among student veterans remediated through VBCS differ from non-VBCS veterans' GPA during their third and fourth academic terms?

H1. There will be no significant difference in term GPA between the student veterans who participated in VBCS and student veterans who did not participate.

Third Term GPA

To determine if differences existed between the third term GPAs of the VBCS (1) and non-VBCS students (2), an independent samples t-test was conducted for the third term of attendance. As displayed below in Table 4.1, there was no significant difference in the term GPAs of the VBCS (M=2.16, SD=1.05, N=16) and non-VBCS (M=2.2, SD=1.02, N=14), t -.80, p=.936. Members in both group earned a C average.

Table 4.1: Independent Samples T-test: 3*rd* Term Collective Term GPA

T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
-.80	28	.936	-.03	.38

These results suggest that the student veterans who completed the VBCS program achieved academic performance during the third term that was statistically equal to the non-VBCS control group. In both groups, N was reduced by one student who withdrew from classes.

Fourth Term GPA

      To determine if differences existed between the fourth term GPAs of the VBCS (1) and non-VBCS students (2), an independent samples t-test was conducted for the fourth term of attendance. As displayed below in Table 4.2, there was no significant difference in the fourth term GPAs of the VBCS (M=2.49, SD=.78, N=11) and non-VBCS (M=1.83, SD=1.46, N=10), t 1.26, p=.227. However, this finding was likely influenced by the reduced and smaller population size due to attrition. Given the limited power of this analysis, it is important to emphasize that the mean GPA of the VBCS group was .65 higher than the control group despite the insignificant test result.

Table 4.2: Independent Samples T-test: 4th Term Collective Term GPA

T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
1.26	13.483	.227	.65	.52

Third Term GPA Frequency

As displayed in Table 4.3 below, of the 16 VBCS student veterans in the study, 75% had GPAs greater than a 2.0, compared to only 50% of the control group students during the third term. This indicates that the top half of the control group is achieving academic success defined as a 2.0 GPA or better; whereas, three-fourths of the VBCS are passing with GPAs sufficient to graduate. In both groups, N was reduced by one student who withdrew from classes.

Table 4.3: Frequencies: 3rd Term Individual Term GPA

Student Group	Valid	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
VBCS	0.00	1	6.26	6.3
	0.50	1	6.26	12.5
	1.00	2	12.44	25.0
	2.00	1	6.26	31.2
	2.15	1	6.26	37.5
	2.20	1	6.26	43.7
	2.38	1	6.26	50.0
	2.50	2	12.44	62.4
	2.60	1	6.26	68.7
	2.72	1	6.26	75.0
	2.75	1	6.26	81.2
	3.00	1	6.26	87.5
	3.66	1	6.26	93.7
	3.75	1	6.26	100%
	Total	**16**	**100%**	
Control Group	0.50	1	7.14	7.1
	1.00	1	7.14	14.3
	1.33	2	14.3	28.6
	1.50	1	7.14	35.7
	1.75	1	7.14	42.9
	1.90	1	7.14	50.0
	2.33	1	7.14	57.1
	2.76	1	7.14	64.3
	3.00	3	21.4	85.7
	3.40	1	7.14	92.8
	4.00	1	7.14	100%
	Total	**14**	**100%**	

Fourth Term GPA Frequency

As displayed in Table 4.4 below, of the 11 VBCS student veterans in the study

group, 81.8% had GPAs greater than or equal to a 2.0, compared to only 50% of the

control group (N=10) during the fourth term. This indicates that only the top half of the

control group is achieving academic success; whereas, four out of five of the VBCS

student veterans are passing with GPAs sufficient to graduate. In both groups, N was

reduced by one student who withdrew from classes or failed to return for the fourth

semester.

Table 4.4: Frequencies: 4th Term Individual Term GPA

Student Group	Valid	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
VBCS	0.69	1	9.1	9.1
	1.80	1	9.1	18.2
	2.00	1	9.1	27.3
	2.38	1	9.1	36.4
	2.50	1	9.1	45.5
	2.66	1	9.1	54.6
	2.80	1	9.1	63.7
	2.92	1	9.1	72.8
	3.00	2	18.2	91.0
	3.66	1	9.1	100%
	Total	**11**	**100%**	
Control Group	0.00	2	20.0	20.0
	0.50	1	10.0	30.0
	1.00	2	20.0	50.0
	2.80	1	10.0	60.0
	3.00	2	20.0	80.0
	3.25	1	10.0	90.0
	3.78	1	10.0	100%
	Total	**10**	**100%**	

While the study population size for the overall fourth term results is small, the

frequency distribution continues to indicate that the vast majority of VBCS students are

likely to persist to graduation given the individual term GPAs and a 2.0 GPA graduation

requirement.

In both academic terms, the hypothesis on academic GPA performance was

validated, as there was no statistically significant difference between the study group and

the control group; however, the frequency distribution tables indicate that three quarters

or more members of the VBCS study group achieved passing grades, while only half of the control group achieved the same.

Question 2

The second research question and hypothesis for this study were:

2) Does the mean percentage of credits earned by VBCS participants differ from non-VBCS veterans' number passed during their third and fourth academic terms?

H2. There will be no significant difference between the credits passed rates of former VBCS student veterans and non-VBCS student veterans.

Third Term Credits

To determine if differences existed between the percentage of credits earned by VBCS (1) and non-VBCS students (2), an independent samples t-test was conducted for the third term of attendance. As displayed below in Table 4.5, there was no significant difference in the percentage of credits earned by the VBCS (M=79.59, SD=29.305, N=16) and non-VBCS groups (M=76.20, SD=32.47, N=14), t .301, p=.766.

Table 4.5: Independent Samples T-test: 3rd Term Credits Earned

T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
.301	28	.766	3.39	11.27

These results suggest that the student veterans who completed the VBCS program earned academic credits during the third term at the same rate as the non-VBCS control group. In both groups, N was reduced by one student who withdrew from classes.

Fourth Term Credits

To determine if differences existed between the percentage of credits earned by VBCS (1) and non-VBCS students (2), an independent samples t-test was conducted for the fourth term of attendance. As displayed below in Table 4.6, there was no significant difference in the percentage of credits earned by the VBCS (M=83.25, SD=23.73, N=11) and non-VBCS (M=64.5, SD=43.36, N=10), t 1.21, p=.246 during the fourth term; however this finding is likely influenced by the reduced population size. VBCS students earned credits at a rate that was approximately 19% higher despite the insignificant statistical test.

Table 4.6: Independent Samples T-test: 4th Term Credits Earned

T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
1.21	13.658	.246	18.75	15.46

Third Term Credits Frequency

As displayed in Table 4.7 below, of the 16 VBCS student veterans in the study, 56.2% earned 100 of the credits taken, while only 50% of the control group students accomplished this during the third term. However, 25% of the VBCS group earned one-half or fewer of credits attempted, as did 21.4% of the control group. Thus, there are a significant number of student veterans in both groups who are academically unsuccessful by this indicator. In both groups, N was reduced by one student who withdrew from classes.

Table 4.7: Frequencies: 3rd Term Credits Earned

Student Group	Valid	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
VBCS	0.00	1	6.3	6.3
	50.00	3	18.8	25.0
	66.67	1	6.3	31.3
	76.92	1	6.3	37.5
	80.00	1	6.3	43.8
	100.00	9	56.3	100%
	Total	**16**	**100%**	
Control Group	0.00	1	7.1	7.1
	25.00	1	7.1	14.3
	40.00	1	7.1	21.4
	75.00	3	21.4	42.9
	76.92	1	7.1	50.0
	100.00	7	50	100%
	Total	**14**	**100%**	

Fourth Term Credits Frequency

As displayed in Table 4.8 below, of the 11 VBCS student veterans in the study,

54.5% earned 100 percent of the credits taken compared to only 50% of the control group

students during the fourth term. However, collectively, the data indicate that neither

group is earning all the credits attempted at a high rate. In both groups, N was reduced by

one student who withdrew from classes or failed to return for the fourth semester. While

the population size reduces the ability to generalize the findings of the overall fourth term

results, the frequency distribution indicates a significant number of student veterans in

both groups are struggling with a full-time student academic load. Given the eight

semester limit on GI Bill benefits, it is likely that many of these student veterans will

exhaust their federal aid before they complete their degrees.

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Table 4.8: Frequencies: 4th Term Credits Earned

Student Group	Valid	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
VBCS	30.77	1	9.1	9.1
	50.00	1	9.1	18.2
	75.00	1	9.1	27.3
	80.00	2	18.2	45.5
	100.00	6	54.5	100%
	Total	**11**	**100%**	
Control Group	0.00	2	20.0	20.0
	20.00	1	10.0	30.0
	50.00	1	10.0	40.0
	75.00	1	10.0	50.0
	100.00	5	50.0	100%
	Total	**10**	**100%**	

Question 3

The third research question and hypothesis for this study were:

3) Does the mean retention rate to the fifth term of former VBCS participants differ from

the non-VBCS veterans' retention rate?

H3. There will be no significant difference in retention rates to the fifth term of former

VBCS student veterans and non-VBCS student veterans.

Retention from 3rd to 5th Term T-Test

To determine if differences existed between retention rates of VBCS (1) and non-

VBCS students (2), an independent samples t-test was conducted for the fifth term of

attendance. As displayed below in Table 4.9, there was no significant difference in the

retention rates for VBCS (M=.59, SD=.507, N=17) and non-VBCS (M=.53, SD=.516,

N=15), t .303, p=.764.

Table 4.9: Independent Samples T-test: Retention from the 3rd to the 5th Term

T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
.303	30	.764	.055	.181

These results suggest that the student veterans who completed the VBCS program were retained as students from the third to the fifth term at statistically the same rate as the non-VBCS control group. Overall, 59% of VBCS students and 53% of student veterans in the control group were retained from the third to the fifth term (see Table 4.10 below).

Retention from 3rd to 5th Term Frequency

Table 4.10: Frequencies: Retention from the 3rd to the 5th Term

Student Group	Valid	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
VBCS	Not Retained	7	41.2	41.2
	Retained	10	58.8	100%
	Total	**17**	**100%**	
Control Group	Not Retained	7	46.7	46.7
	Retained	8	53.3	100%
	Total	**15**	**100%**	

Phase Two – Qualitative Research Results

Phase two of the study used qualitative phenomenological focus group interviews to obtain a deeper understanding of the second guiding research question: Do the academic and social integration experiences of both groups differ and, do VBCS students note any lasting effect of the integration achieved by VBCS on their academic performance or desire to persist in subsequent semesters?

Selection of participants for focus groups was limited to students (N=4,4) who remained enrolled at EKU into their 5th academic term and agreed to participate in the interviews. The two focus groups meet separately for one hour each. The focus groups occurred in March 2013 shortly after mid-terms during the student fifth or sixth academic term depending upon individual university (EKU) start dates, either Fall 2010 or Spring 2011. Both focus groups met in a conference room setting within the Student Services Building at EKU. Each focus group member was asked to sign a consent form (Appendix D). Each group was asked the same set of questions related to academic and social integration (Appendix B), with the VBCS group being asked an additional final question related to their overall evaluation of the VBCS program at the conclusion of the session.

To help control for bias, EKU's Facilitation Center staff conducted both focus group interviews which were recorded and transcribed by EKU's Faculty Senate Recorder. The researcher then conducted a coded analysis of each focus group interview from the transcription and recordings. The focus group interviews followed a semi-structured protocol with integrated follow-up questions interjected only for clarification purposes. Individual follow-up interviews were planned should clarification be needed, but were not employed. Each member was assigned an alias by the researcher during the coding process to protect their identity in the report. For simplicity, comments attributed to members of the VBCS study group are annotated by the letter (V) following the assigned alias name. Members of the non-VBCS control group are annotated by the letters (NV) following the assigned alias name.

After completing the coding analysis, three dominate themes and several sub-themes emerged. The dominate themes were that student veterans in both groups reported difficulty identifying with traditional age students, struggled with making the transition from a structured, authoritarian system to the less structured, open opinion of higher education; and expressed varying degrees of social integration. Sub-themes included the identification of key support networks critical to persistence and similar responses related to academic self-assessment.

Integration with General Population

The most dominate theme that permeated the focus groups was the difficulty identifying with traditional age students. The following quotes provide a picture of how student veterans see themselves interacting with the general traditional-aged student population. Some of the veterans felt their military experiences gave them perspectives that ran counter to the general population:

Larry (V): I guess my biggest challenge [in adjusting to college] would be other

viewpoints… a lot of times in the classroom I've butted heads a lot with other

students and professors. So it took me a while to figure out how to manage that.

David (V): "My opinions usually aren't the same as someone who came here right out of

high school."

Cheryl (NV): I lived in a dorm room the first couple of years I was here, and I

hated that because the maturity level of myself and all of the other girls that were

on the floor with me was just a big difference. And I really didn't feel like they

understood because I feel like that experience [being in the military] just really

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added to my maturity level. I'm only 20 years old, and I'm already married.

Like, I was just ready to get my life going. So it was a big difference, and I hated

being in the dorm room environment. The first year I was here I roomed with my

friend from high school; and she did not join the military or anything like I did.

And, it was a big difference in how we interacted with each other after I got back

because I changed so [much].

The differences in age being a barrier to social integration with recent high school

graduates were mentioned by several veterans as well:

Mark (V): "I have found it difficult to deal with being in class settings, especially once

the cohort courses were over, and just feeling like I actually fit in with a handful of 18

and 19 year olds."

Ray (NV): Having other like-minded people was difficult to find. At 30 almost,

going back to college is difficult, it's different. It definitely wasn't my first go

around. At 20 you know, 19 or whatever I was, at a community college in

Lexington. Just, I'm ten years older. I've gone through ten more years of life than

most of these kids.

Mark (V): I have to agree with the whole not even fitting in. I ended up getting

into the Honors Program and thinking this will be great; I'm going to be around

people that are interested in actually learning things. As it turns out, this whole

group of kids, unless you live in Sullivan Hall with them, they don't know how to

talk to you, and it makes it difficult.

Stanley (NV): I'm a nontraditional student; I live by myself. Like I come here you know, I see kids that are 18 and I'm 26. What am I going to talk to them about? So, coming into this experience and having 17 and 18 year old kids sitting around looking at you is just weird.

In several cases, the veterans expressed both angst and restraint when it came to situations where they felt disrespect was being demonstrated by younger students towards the classroom environment or them personally.

Stanley (NV): For me, it's probably a little bit silly, but just disrespectful kids. Like people that come in late or sleep or text or you know just completely rude to the classmates and professors. That's my biggest problem, because I want to jump into that NCO mindset …that part of the military in me wants to take over. So it's hard to just sit back and watch stupid stuff go on. Luckily, it doesn't happen a lot, but that's probably my biggest challenge, just keeping my mouth shut when I see something that I think is out of line or shouldn't be tolerated.

Chad (V): [Reference communicating with younger students] It's not for a lack of trying. I know I can probably speak for everyone. We've tried to [integrate], it's just they just don't. I've actually been made fun of here like this is middle school or something. It's enough to make you want to laugh; like that stuff will affect you. But you're in college. You're supposed to be a little bit older. Like, who cares? They actually take the time out of their day to say a snide remark to me like I would lose a minute of sleep or something.

Mark (V): So like as far as maintaining your reading and being on top of what you're doing, that's just like a natural instinct for me. And when you show up to class and there's been thirty pages of reading assigned that hurt your head to read and you're supposed to be ready to talk about it, and people are running around not talking about it; and then alienate you as an individual for being able to talk about it and being open enough to actually run your mouth, is conflicting to deal with.

Others express appreciation for having some contact with other veterans through the cohort classes:

Larry (V): "If it wasn't for those [cohort] classes, I wouldn't know anyone. It would just be me coming to class and going home. No socialization whatsoever. I don't feel any connection at all with other [non-vet] students."

Cheryl (NV): "I've heard from a lot of people that do benefit from them [cohort classes], just because of the disrespect or you know the manner of the students that aren't in the military, how they act."

David (V): "I think my grades are probably a whole point higher when I was still taking cohort classes…we all had each other's backs… wish there were more of [those] classes available. I don't have anything in common with anybody else."

From a faculty perspective, students in both groups related positive responses:

Stanley (NV): I've had really solid professors for the most part. And like there's a mentality on this campus where, especially in the Department of Government, we're looked like as assets in the classroom. It's always like, they don't ever

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force you to give input or talk about something that you're uncomfortable with,

but I have yet to have a professor that has cast me aside or shun me away or not

take my life experiences and my past in the military into account–especially if it's

something relevant to the lecture.

David (V): "Every teacher I've had in my major [Fire and Safety] I've had a pretty good

connection with; all the other ones, not so much. A couple of them are pretty awesome.

My English teacher was pretty good."

Overall members of both groups appear to have struggled to find common ground

with traditional students coming directly from high school and have found more

acceptance among the faculty than expected. Stanley expressed what his buddy at

another university experienced this way: "My buddies, like there was one he dropped a

class because his professor was like vehemently anti-military. And, like, I just don't get

that here; and I don't get that from the student body either." The general impression left

throughout both interviews was that the younger students did not demonstrate much

maturity, had little world experience, and were still caught up in the social drama of

college life, all of which precluded developing meaningful dialogue. This is perhaps not

an atypical view of most adult learners. According to Thomas & Chickering (1984),

adult learners are highly pragmatic in their approach to their educational goals, exhibiting

a more problem-centered or skills development focus in the formal academic

environment (Horn,1998).

As cited in chapter two, Tinto argues that a student's commitment to success is

either bolstered or diminished depending upon their ability to become academically and

socially integrated (Tinto, 1975). Tinto's model presumes that a student's intention and commitment to educational goals corresponds to their overall likelihood to persist and that from an institutional perspective, academic and social integration issues such as adjustment, academic difficulty, incongruence, and isolation are negative factors that lead to student departure (Tinto, 1993). While the viewpoints expressed during the focus group interviews were strong, there was no indication that the lack of social integration with or isolation from the general populations of traditional age students had much bearing on either group's persistence. Overall, faculty support of student viewpoints may have been a positive factor in the retention of both groups and might have counterbalanced the negative attitudes from and towards the general student population.

Transition from Military to College

A second dominate theme that emerged from the focus groups was transition from a structured authoritarian system to the less structured open opinion format of higher education. The following quotes provide a picture of how student veterans see themselves coping with that transition:

Jeremy (NV): I didn't react as well to the freedom of "oh well just get this done by this day," you know, because my own experience with initial entry training. Like, every minute of your day, for the most part, [there] was scheduled and planned. So it was kind of difficult to be like, okay, well I don't have to do this right now, so where is the incentive there?

Cheryl (NV): In basic and AIT [Advanced Individual Training], you have a battle buddy–that person that's supposed to be with you anywhere you go, no matter

what. And then you also have this group of people that you do everything with. And so you get to college, and it's you're on your own. Or, you can join a sorority or fraternity or whatever. I didn't do that. I'm more of an independent person, so I guess I liked that–but it was an adjustment.

Ray (NV): Time management, that was difficult. Like reading, not reading, and good study habits outside of school. Like trying to figure out how to implement those into my non-contact lecture, how to study off site, just proper study habits, healthy study habits was a nice little challenge.

Jeremy (NV): I just kind of lost my sense of purpose when I left the military. And I mean for a while I got seriously depressed and basically it was, I just felt like I was going through the motions and not accomplishing anything. I mean I was in school. I mean I did well in school, you know, and it's not like, I don't know, I just felt like it really didn't mean nothing at all, honestly deep down, and I just felt kind of lost. Being a first-time college student and pretty fresh from training it was all a totally unknown process; I was a little stressed about it. And I wasn't real confident that I would know what to do or that I could go there and get done what I wanted to get done.

Mark (V): I think the time thing was hard to adjust to just from going from being used to getting up in the morning and having a schedule all day long to having like a schedule that was random and spread out and showing up to class on time– probably the hardest thing to do for college. They have this attendance policy thing; they don't really work.

Chad (V). I'm going to have to go with the time [management] thing myself because it's really hard to switch gears, as they were saying, to put down the school thing and have time for my wife. She works nights, so it's hard for me. And especially in today's connected world, I think some of the professors forget that not all of us live here on campus and just do school. And they email you an assignment at 9:30 at night and it's due the next morning. And by the time I leave campus, "student" is off and now it's family time. I still struggle having to focus on one subject for the briefest of moments and then switching gears completely to something else which is contradictory to how work, you know your jobs go. And especially your military guys because you're supposed to concentrate on one thing and become a master of that.

Ray (NV): "I found it a difficult transition from going from being the lecturer to being lectured. From being the guy always up in front of my divisions and my comrades, sort of being like the professor [instead of the student]."

Mark (V): A lot of people on campus I've dealt with that have kind of crossed the lines of dealing with the VA is, they're unaware of how hard it is to deal with these things. Teachers don't seem to understand that you haven't gotten a book stipend yet and you don't have money to buy a book.

For the most part, the issues highlighted by veterans in both groups reflect adult learner issues related to returning to higher education; with time management being the dominate theme surrounding finding the time needed to balance other life priorities like work and family and do meet the coursework requirements. Several veterans in both groups

expressed the depth of the adjustment required to go from a totally structured environment to a more random college schedule. Members of both groups seemed to express the ability to adapt to the collegiate environment and gave minor indication that the transition experience was a barrier, but not significantly so as to hinder their persistence. It should be noted that one limitation of this part of the study is that the interviews only occurred with students who persisted to the fifth or sixth term. Whether these time management issues were a major factor in student veteran departure from school is wholly unknown.

Before addressing the final primary emergent theme, two secondary themes are worth noting: key support networks critical to persistence and similar responses related to academic self-assessment.

Key Support Network

Bean and Metzner (1985) distinguish direct and indirect variable that influence the decision to drop out, finding four variables that have significant influence: prior academic performance; intent to leave; defined goals; and environmental factors such as hours worked, support, responsibility for others, and credit for prior learning. Both focus group student veterans placed strong emphasis on support for education by family and friends in relating their reasons for persisting:

 Ray (NV): "Family. That's it. Well friends of course, especially veteran friends who had already been through the process and sharing their experiences with me, but mainly family."

Cheryl (NV): "Family was a big one for me. My uncle is in the guard so any time I had an issue or problem I could always call him. He's the one who got me to join anyway."

Chad (V): I would go ahead and say my wife. She, literally, won't let me quit because I really don't want to do this to be honest with you because I can make more money working. There's no sense in doing school when you're already almost 30 years old. And with a bachelor's degree today you have to really go beyond that to really get a really good career. And if I'm going to be beyond my eyeballs in debt and be 40 before I can start paying it back, there's really no point. So I would have dropped out after the first semester had not been for her because she literally won't let me stop.

Larry (V): "Likewise, my wife. I would probably be back in the Marine Corps right now if it wasn't for her."

Jeremy (NV): Basically, the only people that really encouraged me before I even got here were military, military people when I was signing. And they said you need to go to college. Take advantage of these benefits that are here for you. And that's pretty much what I've been doing. But as far as keeping it to the university level, it's been teachers, I guess, and some of my military friends.

Bean and Metzner (1985) argued that Tinto's model over-stated the impact of socialization, reflecting that nontraditional and adult student characteristics such as family obligations, work, rate of enrollment, and age significantly reduce the impact of social interactions on the retention of the non-traditional populations. Larry's reflection

supports Bean and Metzner's case for why adult learners have such little time for social

involvement:

> I would say that [challenges] outside would have to be juggling time, school, and
>
> family. Coming into it and being a little bit older, and having a mortgage, car
>
> payment, and all of this other stuff you have to take care of on top of taking
>
> classes. And then doing homework, and then you have to find time to spend with
>
> your wife, and you have to find time, you know, to do all this other stuff, and it
>
> gets pretty tenuous.

This brief description encapsulates what many adult students, not just veterans, face when

approaching higher education. This also may help explain the rapid growth of online

degree programs that provide greater flexibility in working around other commitments,

something that the traditional classroom setting that is tied to a set time and place cannot

easily accommodate. Overall, family support is clearly considered a critical component in

these students decision to persist and should be factored into any planned programming

by veteran service providers; insuring families are included in event activities to foster

greater participation.

Academic Assessment

When queried regarding self-assessment of academic performance, members of

both groups gave various responses indicating there was room for improvement:

> Chad (V): There's always room for improvement. I mean that's the best way to
>
> wrap up my academic route. I get exactly out of it what I can put into it. And
>
> notice I said 'can put into it' not 'what I do put into it'. So it fluctuates.

Larry (V): I feel given the restrictions placed upon my life–like family, working, bills, and other stuff like that–I'm doing fairly well. I was like college, wonder how this is going to be. This is going to suck but I've got to do it if I want to get a job that makes any type of money. So yeah, I would say fairly well.

Mark (V): "Academically, on the successful end, I guess, yeah. I could probably learn more than I do, but I'm able to get away with not doing that. I guess academically doing good. I can't really say much else about it."

David (V): "Room for improvement."

Cheryl (NV): I feel like I'm doing the best I can. I've been taking summer classes since I've been here. So I'll be graduating in 3 ½ years if all goes as planned. So I feel like I'm doing the best I can.

Stanley (NV): I feel pretty solid, like I think. Overall I mean I'm pretty solid you know and Eastern has afforded me with some great opportunities. So I think that, like, there's indeed some chance afterwards. I'm already looking at graduate school and stuff, so pretty good.

Ray (NV): "Room for improvement."

Jeremy (NV): As far as my academic standing here at the university (EKU) and success, I feel like I've been very successful. You get into those upper levels, and you've got to re-learn those study habits again. It's just a little different.

In order to protect the privacy of focus group participants, the shading of scores in Table 4.11 below shows the frequency GPA distribution during the third term without identifying individuals. Members of the control group of non-VBCS students responded

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with high confidence when asked about their performance, while VBCS members

indicated they had room for improvement. These comments may be more reflective of

those who participated in the control group who, representatively, were in the upper

performance tier.

Table 4.11: Frequencies: 3rd Term Individual Term GPA(Individual Highlighted)

Student Group	Valid	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
VBCS	0.00	1	6.26	6.3
	0.50	1	6.26	12.5
	1.00	2	12.44	25.0
	2.00	1	6.26	31.2
	2.15	1	6.26	37.5
	2.20	1	6.26	43.7
	2.38	1	6.26	50.0
	2.50	2	12.44	62.4
	2.60	1	6.26	68.7
	2.72	1	6.26	75.0
	2.75	1	6.26	81.2
	3.00	1	6.26	87.5
	3.66	1	6.26	93.7
	3.75	1	6.26	100%
	Total	**16**	**100%**	
Control Group	0.50	1	7.14	7.1
	1.00	1	7.14	14.3
	1.33	2	14.3	28.6
	1.50	1	7.14	35.7
	1.75	1	7.14	42.9
	1.90	1	7.14	50.0
	2.33	1	7.14	57.1
	2.76	1	7.14	64.3
	3.00	3	21.4	85.7
	3.40	1	7.14	92.8
	4.00	1	7.14	100%
	Total	**14**	**100%**	

In referencing back to the research conducted by DePaul University using a sample of a first-year non-traditional cohort, they found significant variance in retention based upon GPA – 85.6% retention for students with a GPA greater than 3.0, 80% for those with GPAs between 2.0 and 2.49, and 46.9% for those with less than a 2.0. The same report documented a significant relationship between high GPAs and graduation rates. In the DePaul study, students with a GPA greater than 3.0 had the highest graduation rate at 77.4%, while those with below a 2.0 graduated at just 13.3% (Lang & Powers, 2011). If these results were to play out with the members of this study, it is likely that the VBCS students would persist to graduation at a higher rate than their non-VBCS peers as evidenced in Table 4.11 showing that 75% of the study group had GPAs greater that a 2.0 compared to only 50% of the control group members during the third term. From a longitudinal point of view, it would be interesting to monitor and compare graduation rates for both groups going forward.

The third primary emergent theme was the varying degrees of social integration. This theme is broken into three sub-categories: use of veterans' resources, connecting with other veterans, and response to a question to the study group specifically about the VBCS program.

Though both groups equally praised the resources provided by EKU's Veterans Success Center, the VBCS study group expressed a stronger veteran affinity and an enlightening insight into how this group of student veterans approaches social integration with their peers.

Of note is the consistent praise from members of both group towards the Veterans

Success Center, the resources dedicated by EKU to support student veterans as well as

the general atmosphere of support for veterans on campus.

Chad (V): I think the only assistance from Eastern that I've ever gotten that's

actually helped me came from the Vet's office. I mean that's it, and I've actually

reached out to other groups like the nontraditional students, and they're more

interested in recapturing that youth, they were in college you know, let's be 20

years old again. And I'm not interested in any of that stuff.

Larry (V): I work with the Vet's office as a work study, and it's definitely helped

me out a whole lot. They have a plan set up to where (if it were up to the VA, we

wouldn't get paid anything until near the end of the semester) so they pay us

money early so we can live off of it on good faith knowing that the VA's is going

to pay the school. And that really helps us out a lot so, especially us with family

and mortgages and payments and everything. We depend on that money or else

we wouldn't be going to school. But just being around like-minded people and

knowing that I'm not the only one with the same issues and the same problems,

that's been really good.

Stanley (NV): Like all my buddies [at other schools], you know, you keep in

touch with them on Facebook and stuff. And every semester they don't have their

benefits coming in. They don't; they go without almost the entire semester, like

they're always playing catch up. I've only had one issue with my paperwork here

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at Eastern, and it's completely the VA's fault. It wasn't Eastern's fault at all.

Maybe I'm just really lucky when it comes to my paperwork not having, you

know, bureaucratic issues; but I know a lot of my buddies, like time after time,

every semester they don't have their money coming to them.

Mark (V): I got a call from out of nowhere. I didn't even know who this person

was, and he was like hey, come in and I'll tell you what credits you've earned

through military experience, I'll get you set up on what you need to fill out to get

your aid initiated. Without that, I would have probably not made it a semester. I

would have just given up and walked away. But yeah, that's a good thing; having

someone that specifically has got your back and able to deal with those forms and

the VA and stuff.

Jeremy (NV): It made me feel like I should be here because they were trying to

cater to me as a university. And that's the reason I came here. I almost went to

UK, but UK had no service. Like I would call and like there was no one person

that could say "oh yeah come meet me here, come do this". It was like "well you

need to call these people or you need to get this paper or you need to do that." If

it wasn't for the VA department here, I probably wouldn't have come here. But,

it definitely made a huge difference that they had a segment of the university

[EKU] administration that was dedicated to helping veterans enroll. So it was

really cool having people who were legitimately willing to sacrifice their time and

their schedule to help me meet this need or this desire.

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Ray (NV): You know thankfully I sought refuge in EKU VETS [Veteran student

organization] which was an invaluable resource for finding like-minded people.

The Veterans Office helped out a lot too, like getting CLEP credit for classes and

just bringing in free credits to the university [EKU] without having to start from

zero credit hours. I've realized how lucky we are to be at this institution as

opposed to other students' experience at other larger or smaller universities.

Definitely we are in the lucky, lucky few to have the resources available to us that

we have here. First this giant office and now the whole Burnham House being

completely dedicated to veterans-everything [from] certifying processes,

bureaucratic nightmares, etc. UK? Forget about it. You're on your own, with a

student population of over 30,000 people. So I consider that a high, a high

influence and often an under regarded, very tangible asset to people like me, to

people like all of us in this room. We're very, very fortunate to have so many

people working for us instead of against us or even willing to assist us for that

matter.

Other than the Veterans Success Center there was no other support services sited

specifically by either group, expect for one specific negative remark about tutoring

services.

Chad (V): I will say, since hopefully this may be heard by someone of

importance one day, that student-run tutoring centers, I feel, are a waste of time

because, I know I might be biased, but the student tutors, they aren't interested in

helping you and they think it's a social period. I know they get credit for doing it

or get paid or whatever, but I've gone into some of them and either been ignored

for hours or [left] more lost. It's kind of been the blind leading the blind. I don't

need a "C" student tutoring me, and that's what they have in there just because

they can collect minimum wage and not really do anything. So I feel those things

are just a waste of time on campus even though I have tried to use them. But, like

I said, beyond the VA assistance, nothing here is, and I've actually tried. I know

a lot of us have tried to use those programs. They're just a waste of time.

I know visited the new Biology tutoring lab this semester, and every time I went,

in the tutors were just tweeting and texting or more or less.

The overall strong support for the Veterans Success Center is a tribute to the personnel

who conduct business in a proactive manner, from expediting student benefits to the

conveniences of a one-stop shop. These accolades validate the programs #1 Best for

Vets: College ranking in 2010 and 2012, and a #2 national ranking in 2011 based upon

the Military Times EDGE survey rankings. Although all of the participants were aware

that the researcher was the former Associate Director for Veterans Affairs and may have

spoken more positively out of deference and support, the respondents did contrast the

services provided by EKU with experiences other veterans report at different institutions;

indicating that the service provided at EKU are more supportive than most. In relation to

this study, the strong veterans' support infrastructure provided by the institution is likely

to have had a positive bearing on student veteran retention across the board, as there

appears to be no variance in how both VBCS and non-VBCS students rate the services.

Connecting with Other Veterans

Evidence supports the notion that strong peer group identification can bolster academic success and may be as influential as the experiences in a college classroom (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). One of the most interesting dialogues during the interview with the VBCS study group sheds great insight on how veterans define their own concept of social integration. Note, these next passages include prompts by the facilitator:

> Chad (V): I would say that the nature of being in the military means you get a
>
> close net group of friends and that kind of stays with you. So I would say I'm not
>
> real close friends with any vets here, not that a network of friends wouldn't help.
>
> I'm closer to my friends from other military service probably. But my opinion of
>
> a good support group is one that you can ignore, but it's always there for you
>
> whenever you need it, if that makes sense, and that's something that the Vet
>
> program here does. If I don't ever want to go down to that office, I don't have to.
>
> But the second I have a problem, everybody knows my name there, and they help
>
> me. I've never gone a week without them, from the start of a problem to having it
>
> finished. And then after that, it's out of my mind, and it doesn't even exist. But
>
> it's also there for people who do want to go down and hang out and study together
>
> and stuff. I know some people do get stuff out of it. I know for me I like to keep
>
> it in perspective, only use it when I need it. It's extremely well placed.
>
> Larry (V): I do find the veteran friend. There are a few friends here that I'll
>
> consider really good friends. They're the best friends I've made during my three

years. And those guys really help out–as well with academics–letting loose, that kind of thing. It also helps to the same degree, hey did you have this class, how was that, should I take 'em, should I not take 'em, that kind of stuff.

Chad (V): Under certain circumstances, I'm not saying that they wouldn't be, under certain circumstances, be good people to be friends with. It's just, and it goes like with what you were saying, that I know a lot of vets are in a few different major programs, like criminal justice, and there's only some of us, I don't know how many, that are in Art?

Mark (V): "Yeah, there's not really any other vet [in my major], I've fallen away from that."

Chad (V): "I think I'm one of three in my major. So that kind of, I think that's more of a deciding factor than your Vet status or not."

Mark (V): It definitely, back to the cohort thing again in that first, what, three semesters, kept me in college. And I definitely made a good handful of brothers that I can trust and know will be there. And I agree entirely with the statement, the support group that you can forget it exists until you need it. It's been good for that.

David (V): I agree. It's not something that you have to put time into. Like, oh we're having a meeting again, we have a meeting today, let's all meet at this time and place, take time away from school and work. It's there when you need it, whether you know them personally or not. Like, I don't know him personally but I know his name. I know he's a Marine, and I can depend on him.

Chad (V): And I think that's what is really well about it because in like other social groups, especially younger people, they take it personally. They want you

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to drop what you're doing and go do everything with them. We can all ignore each other, but we're all friendly every time we run into each other. And that's something we don't take personally. We know we all have lives outside of this. And, you know, those Vet Club things, emails, they go out inviting us, and they don't take it personally that we don't show up. I know some people don't go to any of them. I don't. I don't have time to do that. But in other social circles, if you don't, if your whole life's not about it, it becomes a problem to them. That's why I really value that.

Facilitator: "That's good insight, what you all shared, thank you."

Chad (V): "We don't take it personally, I guess that's what I'm trying to say. We don't take it personally that we're not all best friends because we know how each other's lives are."

Facilitator: "But you feel the support."

Chad (V): "Exactly. And I know if I actually did need something from some of them, we would be able to hook up and get something done."

Mark (V): "Yeah, for sure."

David (V): "It would be like hanging out with your brother too much and not want to kill him if you're around too much."

Chad (V): "That, too. We all think alike so we probably shouldn't hang out."

Mark (V): But you know you can trust the Army's [all services implied] opinions on classes, like you said. Is this dude [instructor] a dickhead, can I take this course or am I going to want to cut [read drop] him? You know, it's nice. You

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can pretty much walk into the Veterans lounge and run into someone that you

recognize as a veteran, one way or another. And we're like hey what do you

know about this CMS class, this dude, did you take that one? Is it going to work

for me? And you can get an honest answer that you can trust the opinion of,

which is hard to get out of the general population of students because they don't

really have a clue what "hard to deal with" is in certain situations. So, it's nice to

have that body of people and that place to go where you can be like hey, can we

do this or it going to go bad?

Larry (V): "For them [Gen Pop], having homework is hard to do."

Mark (V): "Yeah".

Larry (V): "You won't like him, he gives homework. It's a life altering problem,

homework. Try having a mortgage, being three months behind in your car payments, and

haven't seen your wife in four weeks."

Chad (V): Another good thing about it is anytime you can walk into a classroom

and you can automatically see a veteran there, you already know you have a

partner for that class. And maybe you haven't seen each other for a year or so

from the last time you took a class, but that's how we all just naturally pair up.

And, then we go our separate ways again.

Facilitator: "That's a level of comfort."

David (V): "Even new veterans. You can kind of pick them out."

Mark (V): "Yeah."

Chad (V): And that's something else, yeah, you can just kind of tell around here who's, which one of us is in the classroom. Short, concise answers. That's something that we all have in common. We like to get our work done early if we can get it, that kind of stuff. So it's good to have someone you can, and I think that also helps build on your social network, when you meet someone you don't personally know and then it continues from there.

David (V): "If not by the way they're dressed, if a teacher or professor asks an opinionated question, you'll figure it out whenever they open their mouth."

The most enlightening aspect of this dialogue is the natural and immediate bond that exists between service members of all branches; from being able to spot another veteran in a classroom to similar thought patterns, that reflect on how permanently military service can be imprinted on an individual's character. The passage also highlights how student veteran's idea of social integration differs from other non-traditional students. In the dialogue, the veterans' expressed psychological comfort of knowing that a support network exists, providing a certain level of reassurance. The dialogue also validates once again the statement made by Thomas and Chickering (1984) that adult learners tend to be highly pragmatic in their approach to their educational goals; as the underlying message throughout the passage is in a sense of mission, swayed little by the coming and goings of student life. These thoughts may also help explain why many college and university veterans' support service administrators who attend the annual Veterans Symposium in Louisville lament and commiserate over the difficulty in getting veterans to participate in the student veteran organization or attend planned

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events. It appears that veterans are not seeking a formal social network but are willing to accept identification into a student veterans group, appreciate the ability to connect on an ad hoc basis as needed, without remorse or judgment of others for not participating in a more formal manner. It should be noted that this pattern did not develop within the non-VBCS control group and thus could be a by-product of the social integration achieved in the VBCS cohort program. This willingness to embrace a veteran identity, yet choose a loosely defined concept of brotherhood for social integration is intriguing and would make for an interesting case study to explore whether this is a phenomena unique to the VBCS cohort experience or a more widely held concept among all student veterans.

Veterans Bridge to College Success

The two previous sub-categories reflect VBCS and non-VBCS responses to questions proffered in the focus group interviews designed to solicit attitudes towards engagement with veteran peers. The variance in praise for the Veterans Success Center between groups was negligible; however, the level of veteran identification was much stronger within the VBCS study group. Since both groups accessed the primary services of the Veterans Success Center equally, the stronger veteran affinity within the study group could be attributed to the forced socialization created by the VBCS cohort classes. To ascertain how important the VBCS program specifically was to persistence, the study group was asked an additional question at the end of the standard interview: Question 9: On a scale of 1-10, how important was the social integration with other veterans through the cohort program to your desire or ability to persist in college? Each person was asked to write down their response first, and then each member of the group was given the

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opportunity to share. The following passages reflect a composite of each student's

expressions during this final dialogue:

Chad (V): Ten, very most important. At first it was completely vital, most

important thing, being given the tools, the non-educational things you need to

know to stay the course on a day-to-day basis. Those came, I credit that coming

exactly from the cohort program. Now I'm not sure how those professors were

picked to teach the courses, whether they just volunteered or not, but I thought the

selections were really excellent; they were really understanding. Even the ones

who were more liberal-minded than some of us might be; they were still expertly

picked. Now had you asked me back then it probably would have been a different

score because especially Travis' class, the GSO, I thought it was a lot of busy

work. But now I can see why we had to do it all. It was just a regimental kind-of

check your email all the time. Had I rated it back then it would have been lower,

but now, looking back I give it a much higher ranking. If you'd asked me then I

would have said it was a waste of my time.

David (V): On the 1-10 scale 10 being the strongest, I'd give it a 10. The cohort classes

really helped me find a footing in school. [Note: David received a phone call during this

part of the interview, gave only a brief response to the question, and appeared in a hurry

to leave.]

Larry (V): I gave it an eight just because, nothing can be really perfect. But as

far as helping me out, I feel that eight is really well. I rated it very highly as far as

interaction of veterans through the cohort program. Just like you said in the very

beginning, it was instrumental in keeping my attention. Letting me know what to

do, what I had to do, you know. College was such a new concept to me. I had no

clue. All I knew was from high school to nine years after, all I had known was

the military and very structured and this is completely opposite. So, you know,

due to that, that [VBCS] really helped me out. Being fresh and new and not

having a clue, some of the stuff we did I was like, why are we doing this. I have a

lot better stuff to do. Just tell me what I need to do to get through college, and

that's all I want to know, and let me go do it. But, there's a method behind the

madness. So I would definitely, [back] then if you would've asked me this

question I would probably have given it like a four or a five.

Mark (V): Ten, very most important. It's definitely the key factor that kept me in

school. I think I've said that several times, but I really don't know what I

would've done without being in that English course. I mean it had been a decade

since I had written anything more than my name or like some random

nomenclatures. I remember in particular we went to the ravine and we were just

talking about hyperawareness and that kind of thing, and how to deal with that.

And that was what I took out of the veterans' orientation that helped me a lot. I do

have to say that what the Veterans Orientation class really helped me a lot as far

as the year that I was in it. I was turned on to a whole lot of possibilities to

submit work to journals and do other outside-of-school academic activities that I

don't know that I would have gotten, necessarily, out of the general orientation

course, just what I've heard about it. So that really helped me because it kind of

gave me this guidance of how you can get out there and get yourself out and about and around more so than just kind of coming to school and going through the motions. And that's been good for me.

Question 9 was the only question that participants were asked to provide a written response before discussing. The intent was to protect the integrity of the responses so that others would not simply follow the same theme as the person before them. Responses indicate that the VBCS was a critical component in student veteran persistence in college and that individual's appreciation for the importance of the program has grown over time and with educational experience as both Chad and Larry voiced. Of the four members, only one did not give it a ten on a scale of 1-10, with ten being the highest positive ranking. Larry rated it eight out of ten simply because he felt nothing is perfect; thus, his expression of support reflects his highest ranking possible. It would be helpful to repeat this study with subsequent year groups to validate these responses. Among this group, each VBCS focus group participant expressed strong appreciation, albeit in retrospect, for the program's effort to improve the transition to college experience. Although none of the participants directly mentioned the social integration aspect of the program, the previous reflections about the comfort of having veteran peers accessible on an as needed basis speaks to the importance of group identity.

An overall examination of these responses confirms Rendón's (1993) validation theory on the importance of personal validation and its effect on the academic performance of non-traditional students. Rendón's suggestion that active forms of validation are needed to encourage nontraditional students to persist would be an accurate

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description of the VBCS program's ultimate objective. As Rendón suggests, validation must begin in the early stages of a student's academic program, ideally through instructors and student peer engagement (Rendón, 1994). Rendón found that non-traditional students communicated doubts about their ability to succeed and that through validation they developed confidence in their ability to learn and gained a heightened sense of self-worth. The study group's reflection on the importance of the VBCS program suggests as much in this case. The VBCS program exemplifies Rendón's theory that success, especially within their first year, is related to whether students become involved in institutional life; if you define institutional life as the program itself. Overall, there is ample evidence that student veterans in the study group gained confidence in their ability persist through the VBCS experience. What is unknown, and is a limitation of this study, is what caused the failure to persist among the non-returning veterans in either group. Thus, while study group members reported strong validation, it is unknown if those who departed felt likewise and what the ultimate reason was for their departure.

Summary of Research Findings

The population for this study was comprised of new first time student veterans who entered EKU either college ready (control group) or underprepared for college (study group). The determination of underprepared for the study group was based upon placement exams administered by EKU's testing center. Study group students participated in the Veterans Bridge to College Success (VBCS) program by taking a transition to college course tailored specifically for veterans and refresher (developmental) coursework in classes with only their underprepared peers.

The population size was relatively small but adequate as both the study group (N=17) and the control group (N=15) were relatively equal in size. Quantitative analyses comparing third and fourth academic term GPAs, third and fourth term course completion rates, and third to fifth term retention showed no statistically significant differences. Overall, this should be considered a positive outcome as the design of developmental education is to bring weak academic college students up to adequate college-level (Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2010). While the overall third term GPA was low for both groups, VBCS (M=2.16) and non-VBCS (M=2.2), the frequency results demonstrate that nearly all of the VBCS students were attaining overall passing grades versus only 50% of the non-VBCS students; another positive sign. Although neither the study group (VBCS) nor the control group (non-VBCS) students were retained at substantially high rates, the fact that VBCS students persisted at an equal rate and with passing GPAs can be defined as success.

The qualitative phase of the study provided some insight into the thoughts of student veterans in both groups in regard to their transition to college experiences. The study included two separate semi-structured focus group interviews with members (N=4) from each group. After completing the coding analysis, three dominate themes and two sub-themes emerged. The dominate themes were: difficulty identifying with traditional age students, transition from a structured to a less structured environment, and varying degrees of social integration. Sub-themes included the family as the key support network critical to persistence and similar responses related to academic self-assessment.

Both groups reported similar thought patterns throughout except in regard to aspects of social integration. The VBCS students showed stronger group identity, broader affinity overall and provided insight into how veterans view social integration in a higher education setting. Equally important is the strong endorsement given to the VBCS program and its positive bearing on persistence by all member of the study group. While the control group praised the Veterans Success Center's support, it was more singularly related to services rather than a more pervasive endorsement of the overall pro-veteran campus climate expressed by the VBCS study group.

Given the data presented, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the academic performance and retention rate of students who continued their degree programs after completing VBCS did not differ significantly from college-ready student veteran peers who did not participate in a cohort-based educational program. While not significant, all performance indicators favored the VBCS group. Overall, members of the VBCS study group did proffer testimony to the lasting effect of the cohort program on their academic performance and desire to persist. Chapter 5 will examine these outcomes in regard to implications for practice, policy and future research.

Chapter 5

Discussions

Objective Review

The objective of the study was to discern whether participation in the VBCS program had any significant effect on the persistence of study group members as compared to their non-cohort student veteran peers. The study included both quantitative and qualitative analyses to determine whether student veterans with known academic deficiencies prior to enrollment would persist and perform at similar rates as their academically proficient peers and examine whether or not their academic and social cohort experience in the VBCS program had any lasting impact upon their persistence.

Summation of Quantitative Findings

In summarizing the findings, it is important to reach back to the two overarching questions developed to guide the study. Q1. How did participant's in the VBCS study group and non-VBCS control group perform based upon the following indicators of academic success: term GPA, credits passed rates during a student's third and fourth academic terms, and rate of retention from the third to the fifth academic term? Based upon these indicators, does academic performance and retention rate of students who continued their degree programs after completing VBCS differ significantly from college-ready student veteran peers who did not participate in a cohort-based educational program?

Quantitative analyses comparing third and fourth academic term GPAs, third and fourth term course completion rates, and third to fifth term retention showed no statistically significant differences. The absence of significant statistical differences between the study group and the control group is a positive outcome and can be viewed a moral victory, as student veterans who participated in the VBCS program were under-prepared at the outset of their educational journey yet persisted as well as their college-ready peers. One could conjecture that this persistence emanates from the strong intestinal fortitude developed through military service; however, the veterans themselves give much of the credit to the VBCS experience and support they received from the Veteran Success Center. Although very few members of the study group (12.5%) or the control group (14.3%) achieved term GPAs beyond the 3.0 mark on a 4.0 scale, the higher frequency of study group veterans with GPAs above the 2.0 GPA threshold for graduation (73% versus 50% respectively) is another positive sign.

Of the 11 VBCS student veterans in the study group, 81.8% had GPAs greater than a 2.0 compared to only 50% of the control group (N=10) during the fourth term. This indicates that only the top half of the control group is achieving academic success; whereas, nearly all of the VBCS student veterans are passing with GPAs sufficient to graduate.

In the fourth term, both group's N was reduced by one student who withdrew from classes or failed to return. While the population size reduces the confidence level of the overall fourth term results, the frequency distribution continues to indicate that the

vast majority of VBCS students are likely to persist to graduation given the individual term GPAs and a 2.0 GPA graduation requirement.

In looking back at the review of literature, the study conducted by DePaul University using a sample of a first-year non-traditional cohort found significant variance in retention based upon GPA – 85.6% retention for students with a GPA greater than 3.0, 80% for those with GPAs between 2.0 and 2.49, and only 46.9% for those with less than a 2.0 GPA. The same report documented a significant relationship between high GPAs and graduation rates showing that students with a GPA greater than 3.0 had the highest graduation rate at 77.4%, while those with below a 2.0 graduated at just 13.3% (Lang & Powers, 2011). If these results were applied to this study, it would predict that the members of the VBCS group are more likely to persist to graduation than members of the control group. Only continued monitoring of these groups will confirm this speculation.

Summation of Qualitative Findings

The results of phase two of the study addressing guiding question Q2 are slightly more definitive. Q2 asked: Do the academic and social integration experiences of both groups differ, and did VBCS students note any lasting effect of the integration achieved by VBCS on their academic performance or desire to persist in subsequent semesters?

The qualitative phase of the study provided some insight into the thoughts of student veterans in both groups in regard to their transition to college experiences. During this phase of the study, two semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with four members from each group. Analysis of the results produced three dominate themes: difficulty identifying with traditional age students, transition from a

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structured to a less structured environment, and varying degrees of social integration. Sub-themes included the family as the key support network critical to persistence and similar responses related to academic self-assessment.

The most dominate theme that permeated the focus groups was the difficulty identifying with traditional age students. All members of both groups expressed an inability to interact effectively with the traditional-aged student. Some of the veterans felt their military experiences gave them perspectives that ran counter to the general population, and in several cases, the veterans expressed both angst and restraint when it came to situations where they felt disrespect was being demonstrated by younger students towards the classroom environment or them personally. Overall, members of both groups appear to have struggled to find common ground with traditional-aged students coming directly from high school and have found more acceptance among the faculty than expected. The general impression left throughout both interviews was that the younger students did not demonstrate much maturity, had little world experience, and were still caught up in the social drama of college life, all of which precluded developing meaningful dialogue.

The second dominate theme to emerge from the focus groups was the difficulty of the transition experience from military service to college. For the most part, the issues highlighted by veterans in both groups reflect issues common to adult learners returning to higher education; with time management being the dominate theme; that is finding balance with other life priorities like work and family. Several veterans in both groups expressed the depth of the adjustment required to go from a totally structured

environment to a more random college schedule; however, members of both groups expressed a good ability to adapt to the collegiate environment and gave no real indication that the transition experience was a significant barrier to persistence. As noted in Chapter 4, one limitation to this part of the study is that the interviews only occurred with students who had persisted to the fifth or sixth term and does not eliminate the possibility that difficulties in making the transition to college may have been a cause for early departure by those who had already left EKU.

Somewhat surprisingly, phase two of this study did not obtain a sufficient response related to academic integration. Focus group members commented about their academic performance and relationship with instructors, but only Cheryl (NV) indicated any strong connection to her academic peer group when she said: "I'm actually in a program for Interpreters for American Sign Language and there are twenty-one of us that got accepted. It's a two year program and we're half way through. So I actually have a little bit more connection to them than I do to military members here at the school. So, I mean, I feel pretty closely connected because I see them every day, same classes. All of us are always in there together." It is interesting to note that the strongest bonds appear when a concerted effort is made by the institution to build cohesion within a student group intentionally, in this case among students in the academic major as opposed to veteran identification in VBCS.

Overall, there was little perceptible difference between responses of either group in any of the thematic areas except when it came to the third primary emergent theme regarding social integration. The theme contained three sub-categories: use of veterans'

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resources, connecting with other veterans, and response to a question to the study group specifically about the VBCS program.

In regard to use of veterans resources, both groups praised the support received from the Veterans Success Center, the resources dedicated by EKU to support student veterans, as well as the general atmosphere of support for veterans on campus. They also related how dissimilar that experience was for many of their peers at other campuses around the country. It is quite likely that the strong veterans' support infrastructure provided by the institution has had a positive bearing on student veteran retention across the board, as there appears to be no variance between either group's opinions regarding these services. As cautioned in Chapter 4, all of the focus group participants were aware that the researcher was the former Associate Director for Veterans Affairs and may have spoken more positively for this reason. However, an evaluation of the Veteran Success Center is outside the scope of this study, and therefore, no effort was made to determine if these comments were valid on a broader scale.

In probing the connection to other student veterans, the VBCS study group expressed a strong affinity to their veteran identity yet offered unique insight as to how social integration among the group is perceived. In the dialogue, the VBCS veterans' expressed psychological comfort in knowing that a support network exists, which provided a certain level of reassurance regardless of whether or not they communicated or relied upon their peer group regularly. Overall the veterans appeared quite comfortable with the informal nature of the integration and the ability to connect on an ad hoc basis as

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needed, without remorse or judgment of others for not participating in a more formal manner.

In assessing group identity, the responses from within the VBCS study group were strongest. Since both groups accessed the primary services of the Veterans Success Center equally, the stronger veteran affinity within the study group could be attributed to the forced socialization created by the VBCS program. The VBCS focus group members were asked, "On a scale of 1-10 how important was the social integration with other veterans through the cohort program to your desire or ability to persist in college?" The participants were asked to provide a written response before discussion to protect the integrity of the responses. Three of the four members rated the experience a 10, with ten being the highest positive ranking. Among this group, each VBCS focus group participant expressed strong appreciation for the program's effort to improve the transition to college experience and indentified it as a crucial component to their individual persistence. Based upon these endorsements there is sufficient evidence to support the conclusion that the VBCS program had a positive effect on the study group students' rate of persistence.

Overall Summation of Findings

The population for this study was substantially reduced because of the larger number of student veterans who enter higher education post-service with substantial academic credit to qualify as transfer students. This is positive testimony for the Armed Services who have placed value on education outside service training in their promotion policies for both commissioned and non-commissioned officers and enlisted personnel.

Each service has tuition assistance (TA) programs that provide generous financial aid to servicemembers to support educational goals while actively serving. TA benefits are in addition to GI Bill benefits that are available from the Veterans Administration.

Although the population of study was relatively small, the results in all areas tested showed no statistical difference between the group which should be considered a positive outcome since the goal of developmental education is to bring weak academic college students up to adequate college-level (Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2010). According to the National Association of Developmental Education (NADE), roughly 58 percent of all community college students and 23 percent of all bachelor's degree seeking students nationally take at least one developmental education course in college (NADE, 2009).

According to a June 2010 Kentucky Council on Post-Secondary Education (CPE) report, over 77 percent of academically-prepared first-time, full-time college students in Kentucky were retained to the following fall, compared to only 67 percent of underprepared students. More importantly, the persistence gaps widens with each subsequent year, so much so that by the end of the fourth year only 24 percent of college-ready students graduated and only 6 percent of non-college ready students achieved the same outcome. Using the broader six year graduation benchmark, nearly 57 percent of prepared students graduated compared to only 34 percent of the underprepared students (CPE, 2010).

Relevant research indicates that academic performance, like grade point average (GPA), is a powerful predictor of persistence and degree attainment (Adelman, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Voelkle & Sander, 2008). This is encouraging since

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academic performance during the second year was also found to be a good indicator that a student will complete a bachelor's degree (Adelman, 2006). Thus, the results of the study showing that the VBCS students performed as well as the student veterans who were deemed academically prepared at the time of admissions (non-VBCS) should be considered a success.

While the overall third term GPA was low for both groups; VBCS (M=2.16) and non-VBCS (M=2.2), the frequency results demonstrate that approximately 75% to 90% of the VBCS students attained overall passing grades versus only 50% of the non-VBCS students. In the control group, the top half of student veterans' grades were significantly higher, while the other 50% had term GPAs below a 2.0, making them ineligible for graduation. This may indicate that student veterans in the control group failed to connect with other EKU resources, such as tutoring, that might have helped them achieve a better outcome. This conclusion is reinforced by the fact that barely half of the veterans in both groups earned passing grades in 100% of the attempted courses and is an area that EKU's administration should examine closer to see what interventions might help.

One clear observation from the study's is that student veterans, regardless of age, consider themselves to be non-traditional students and that integration with traditional-aged freshmen coming directly from high school will be a challenge for this group. There is also sufficient evidence to conclude that the VBCS program was a positive force in helping participating student veterans perform and persist at rates equal to a peer group that entered the same institution, at the same time, fully college-ready but were not part of a veteran-only cohort experience.

Limitations of the Study

There were several limitations to this study that are important to note. The study was purposely limited to a small group of students; new first time student veterans at a single 4-year institution that offered a unique method of preparation for non-college ready student veterans. While other institutions have implemented cohort programs for student veterans such as Supportive Education for Returning Veterans (SERV), there were no known comparable programs that focused on under-prepared student veterans in a university setting by which to compare. Ultimately, the subject of this study limited the population size, which imposed its own set of limitations on the ability to generalize conclusions. A longitudinal study encompassing more year groups would have increased the population size and thus the power to find differences that exists, but it would not have changed the fact that it represents only student veterans at a single institution.

The decision to not include non-veterans in the study was deliberate, as comparing those who have not experienced military service would have defeated the purpose of the study. Limiting the study to student veterans was intentional as an effort to minimize the impact of external factors on the conclusions. Albeit, the comments from students in both groups related to the influence of various external factors such as work and family obligations is sufficient that the study must recognize that these factors may have had a significant impact that is not fully recognized or understood.

A final overall limitation to the study is its reconstructive nature; that is, it reports what happened through analysis of facts and retrospection, not as it occurred. This limitation is not unusual in research but one must recognize that memories change, as

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witnessed by the VBCS students rating the importance of their experience higher given the separation of time and further experience in higher education. The conclusions therefore draw upon this reconstructed history of events and their importance to the outcomes and may have skewed the findings in one direction or another that does not totally reflect reality. The results also only reflect the results of those who did persist to the fifth or sixth term and therefore only tells half of the overall story.

Overall, while neither the study group (VBCS) nor the control group (non-VBCS) students had strong retention rates, the fact that VBCS students are persisting at an equal rate and with passing GPAs is a positive sign that should not be overlooked. Despite the study's limitations, the findings appear valid and should be helpful to administrators and researcher involved with assisting student veterans transitioning from military service to college.

Implications for Policy

A most essential component of any study is a look at whether or not certain policies, or support for programs through policies, are helpful to desired student outcomes. While the study itself examines the effectiveness of the VBCS bridge program for under-prepared student veterans, the program itself exists within the broader context of support for returning student veterans in higher education. It is doubtful that a VBCS-type program could exist without the oversight of a veteran's resource center to identify, test, place, and support students within its purview. In the study, both groups readily acknowledge the value of the Veterans Success Center and its impact upon their transition experience. Among sub-groups of adult learners, student veterans have their

own unique challenges, and the decision as to how many resources, either staff or support programming, is greatly dependent upon the number of students within the profile. While many institutions might wish to do more for their student veteran population, the number of students served may not be sufficient to justify the expenses involved. These decisions can only be made by each administration based upon the composition of the student body. Given the strong support by student veterans for dedicated support services, undertaking a student veteran survey of services and conducting a review of polices that impact veterans would be a worthwhile undertaking for any institution to establish a baseline assessment to determine the need for policy changes or programming.

One clear indication presented specific to this study is the need to examine academic performance beyond the initial transition period. The credit pass rate was significantly low and deserves greater scrutiny to determine what interventions or services are needed to improve academic performance. Resolving this shortcoming is essential given the 36 month limit on veterans' educational benefits through the GI Bill.

In regards to academic integration, this study examined the effect of a cohort educational experience on under-prepared student veterans with the findings indicating that the students in this group performed as well as their college-ready peers, albeit on a more consistent basis given the frequency of GPAs above the 2.0 level. These results can be interpreted as a policy success for the VBCS program, which raises the question as to whether the program can be easily duplicated or expanded. Because the VBCS program is required only of under-prepared student veterans, duplication of the program at other institutions would require a volume of under-prepared student veteran applicants,

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developmental course infrastructure, and administrative staffing to select, test, place and support the cohort program. The mix of these criteria is most likely to occur at open or traditional enrollment institutions such as community colleges or regional universities, particularly those closest to military installations. It is equally unlikely that more selective institutions would have the developmental coursework for such a program and questionable whether under-prepared student veterans could persist in such an environment.

While it is possible to foresee the duplication of VBCS-type programs at other institutions, it is more difficult to project the value or viability of expanding the program beyond under-prepared student veteran population. The major obstacle to expansion is academic need. As indicated in the focus group interviews, student veterans, like other adult learners, tend to be highly pragmatic in their approach to their educational goals (Thomas & Chickering, 1984). Unless a program can be directly connected to academic requirements that advance a student veteran's progress towards degree completion, it is unlikely to find support among student veterans or receive payment authorization from the Veterans Administration (VA) which requires that all coursework taken reduce requirements to degree completion. Preparatory courses are considered a necessary requirement by the VA; therefore, funding for the VBCS-type program is assured. However, expansion of the program to fully prepared students would be tentative as the VA expects veterans to be treated the same as other students; thus, creating a special course solely for veterans that is not a requisite for a degree is problematic. Likewise, a non-credit bearing requirement is likely to be viewed by student veterans as punitive in

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nature regardless of the value intended. These obstacles to building cohort programs for all student veterans are further complicated with the heterogeneous nature of the degree options and pathways, especially at larger institutions.   Gathering enough veterans together with the same class requirements can be challenging especially when many of them arrive as transfer students having already completed a good deal of their general education requirements during their time in military service. Examination of the SERV program results may reveal options and solutions that are applicable across a broader array of student veterans and may warrant further review by institutions seeking curriculum-based solutions to academic integration for this population.

Implications for Practice

In examining implications of this study from a practice point of view, duplication of the program is feasible when the follow criteria can be met:

1) There is sufficient number of under-prepared student veterans to fill veteran-only courses each term offered.

2) The existence of military veteran instructors to develop and structure a transition to college course tailored for student veterans.

3) A curriculum solution that justifies the coursework as a requirement for graduation that applies universally to all students albeit with modifications to support student veterans.

4) A veterans' resource center or office that can oversee and manage students entering the program, and support from admissions and testing to accept students who are under-prepared based upon placement testing results.

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At the foundational level, a more fundamental criterion is an institutional support for segregation of student veterans into a cohort experience. DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) cautioned that segregation of veterans from the general population could run counter to the objective of helping re-integrate them into the civilian world. The qualitative findings of this study suggest that the cohort experience is a valuable aspect of the VBCS program and is limited in duration not to be seen as a hindrance However, successful implementation of a VBCS program might require bringing academic affairs administrators and faculty together to debate the pros and cons of cohort community experiences and seek their endorsement before a decision point on starting a program is reached, as faculty support is the cornerstone to any curriculum-based program.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, achieving academic and social integration in the same setting is difficult to achieve when coalescing around a veteran identity principally because the heterogeneous nature of the student veteran population's curricular needs. The VBCS experience is only possible because all of the students entering the program require a transition to college course and have similar developmental refresher needs. The SERV program achieved similar academic and social integration by building cohorts around standard general education coursework (Schupp, 2010). However, both SERV and VBCS face the same dilemma, the sustainment of the experience as students move away from common core materials into discipline specific curriculum requirements. Given the study group's definition of social integration as an "on call" social network emanating from initial cohort experiences, this level of social integration may be all that

is achievable with the limitations of institutional resources and the mission-focused tendencies of the student veteran population.

One practical issue that must be considered for any new initiative is funding. Institutions may have the need and desire to provide assistance to transitioning veterans but may lack the resources to dedicate to such an enterprise. Private grants for general education programming are limited, as are federal funds. Federal funding for developmental education for veterans is available through the Veterans Upward Bound TRIO program offered through the Department of Education; however, there are only 51 national sites across the nation each serving between 125-150 veterans annually. Given the thousands of institutions of higher learning, and the wide distribution of hundreds of thousands of veterans seeking higher education across the nation, the fewer than 7,000 veterans served by the VUB network leaves a considerable shortfall of student veterans needing college transition support (Department Awards, 2012). How much money is needed to implement a VBCS-style program is dependent upon the resources already in place. For example, at EKU the essential curriculum infrastructure needed to implement developmental education programming already existed at the time a decision was made to create a Veterans Resource Center (VRC); therefore, VBCS was a natural outgrowth of the concept of providing essential services to meet the needs of the anticipated influx of student veterans. Albeit, unless a school is able to expend institutional funds to support a VRC or VBCS-type program, the only other alternatives are fund raising or grants. It is unclear if the results from this study provide sufficient evidence to generate funding interests. While this study demonstrates a clear value added to the student veteran

transition process, getting donors to fully fund such an initiative would require a detailed

explanation of the program's cost-benefits; something this study did not include.

A final practical consideration is how to assess and then address the needs of

transfer students. Should a school choose to develop programming around the student

veteran identity, it is important to recognize that many veterans arrive on campus as

transfer students having already garnered more than 24 hours of college credit during

military service. Finding sufficient student veterans to form a veteran only section of any

course would present a distinct set of challenges in terms of student course-need

identification. As noted from the beginning, transfer students were eliminated from this

study because previous college experience could taint the outcome as it would be difficult

to calibrate the effect previous college experience would have on academic performance.

However, it is likely that the transition to full time college status for transferring student

veterans has its own set of issues, the most obvious being the ability to easily transfer

academic and military credit.

Call for Future Research

As noted, the absence of any data on the performance and persistence of student

veterans classified as transfer students is worth studying. Exclusion of this group was

necessary in this study; however, the transfer subset represents a large percentage of the

student veteran population and the absence of any study specific to this group presents an

open field for exploration. Specifically to this study, while only the smaller subset of

new-freshmen student veterans were studied and credit pass rate found to be low, it

would be helpful to know if the same phenomenon presents itself within the transfer

student veteran population so that the full spectrum of need is clearly identified so that resources can be allocated to address the issue.

One promising note is the recent report published by the Student Veterans of America (SVA) organization suggesting a solution may be coming to resolve the problem of not having a national database dedicated solely to the collection and analysis of student veteran academic outcomes exists (Cate, 2013). In the spring of 2013, SVA, the Department of Veterans Affairs and the National Student Clearinghouse signed an agreement to develop a database that will allow for highly accurate, current data on student veterans' academic outcomes, such as enrollment and completion, which will aid policy makers and stakeholders in making well-informed, data-driven decisions regarding veteran issues in higher education (Cate, 2013). The ability to track student veteran's persistence throughout the education cycle will provide foundational data for extensive research related to student veteran persistence across the spectrum of enrollments; part-time, full-time, in-service as well as post-service. A fuller understanding of the migration of student veterans from initial enrollment to graduation to the workforce will add substantially to the body of knowledge about student veteran outcomes.

In regard to this study, it would also be beneficial to follow the study participants to graduation to determine the overall persistence rate of each group, as well as academic achievement. Likewise, extending the study to include additional year groups would provide comparable data that could further validate, expand, or contradict the conclusions of the current study. Additionally, it would be helpful to conduct a cost-benefit analysis so that others considering such a program could assess its feasibility. Cost

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notwithstanding, establishing procedures for continuous tracking, assessment, and evaluation of student veteran performance and persistence is a best practice all institutions seeking to improve their student veteran services should employee.

As touched upon in Chapter 4, VRC Directors report challenges in getting student veterans involved. It was of interest that participants in both groups reported an ability to quickly identify and instantly connect with veteran peers, regardless of the component or nature of service. Combat veterans from the Army and Marine Corps were as accepting of each other as they were to members of the National Guard or Reserves who had no deployment experience. The common bond of military service appeared to be sufficient in gaining mutual acceptance. Yet, this bond was not enticing enough to build a large, self-sustaining social network. The VBCS group's description of an "ad-hoc" network offers some insight into this informal manner of social integration, and would make for interesting research from both a psychological and phenomenological point of view. This willingness to embrace a veteran identity, yet choose a loosely defined concept of brotherhood for social integration is intriguing and would make for an interesting case study to explore whether this is a phenomena unique to the VBCS cohort experience or a more widely held concept among all student veterans.

A final area most obvious in need of extensive research relates to students who depart higher education completely. The tracking proposed by the National Student Clearinghouse will help identify those who persist to graduation, which would present research opportunities on the pattern of student veteran education behaviors and outcomes. However, research dedicated to those who have abandoned higher education

would be worthwhile to determine the causes as well as the consequences of that decision. In some cases, the veteran may have discovered a career pathway that did not require the education being sought, or perhaps external circumstances were insurmountable forcing the student to accept employment that was readily available. While this study helps understand why student veterans were able to persist, it does not adequately explain why others in the same environment did not. Looking beyond persistence and examining the decision making processes of student veterans who are departing higher education would be invaluable to the body of knowledge at large.

Conclusion

In examining the theories behind the research, Rendón's (1993) validation theory is perhaps the most reflective of the behavior patterns by the VBCS study group. The VBCS program exemplifies Rendón's theory that success; especially within their first year, is related to whether students become involved in institutional life; if institutional life is defined as the program itself. Rendón found that non-traditional students communicated doubts about their ability to succeed. Through validation, they developed confidence in their ability to learn and gained a heightened sense of self-worth. This recurring theme is clearly verbalized by the VBCS focus group participants. Simply being in a class surrounded by fellow veterans with similar readiness issues was perhaps the first step toward validating the decision to pursue higher education; knowing that there were others who had chosen the same path and started at the same level of readiness was critical. The study group's reflection on the importance of the VBCS program suggests this point is validated.

The other major theory which the study found relevant was DiRamio and Jarvis's (2011) modified framework of Tinto's theory of student departure. The study did not seek to validate this model but rather to highlight others' attempts to create a framework for the study of student veterans' issues. The debate over what constitutes academic and social integration and how it can or should be tailored to support student veterans is just beginning but this study supports the conclusion that efforts to cultivate relationships between student veterans in an academic setting is beneficial and has residual informal social effects that can foster persistence.

For the purpose of this study, Tinto's (2000) description of learning communities as simply linked courses where members of the same group co-register into a cluster of classes for an entire semester is an accurate depiction of the VBCS program. Creating learning communities requires institutions to dedicate blocks of linked classes, promote the community concept, build both social and academic opportunities into the curriculum, and foster a sense of belonging. The planning for this often resides in multiple offices and requires effective leadership, collaboration, and a significant population of students with similar needs, without which a learning community will likely flounder. Tinto's research indicated that students benefit from learning communities in four ways: they extend the students' support network, students participate in their learning more, the quality of student learning increases, and students become more engaged in campus life and their educational experience (Tinto 2000). While learning communities are neither a panacea nor the right fit for all student-faculty situations, they are a valuable method for promoting student success and retention, provided they are measured for effectiveness

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(Tinto, 2000). This study has provided some measure of the VBCS learning

communities' effectiveness. Whether there is value in the expansion of this concept

beyond the institution involved will be determined by both the volume of demand and the

desire to provide an enhanced level of support to the student veteran population. As the

memory of the wars that produced this surge of veterans leaving the service in search of

educational opportunities wanes, it is uncertain whether or not there will be sufficient

demand or fervent desire. It is the hope of the researcher that this study will provide

sufficient evidence to spur interest in the subject of supporting the student veteran

population and prompt institutions to assess and reflect on their own circumstances.

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Appendix A

Veterans Upward Bound Grant Schools

Veterans Upward Bound Grant Schools

State	Grantee
AL	North Alabama Center For Educational Excellence
AL	Gadsden State Community College
AR	Henderson State University
AR	Pulaski Technical College
AR	University of Arkansas
AZ	Yavapai Community College
AZ	Arizona State University
CA	Santa Ana College
CA	TELACU Education Foundation
CO	Colorado State University/ Pueblo
CO	Metropolitan State University of Denver
FL	Pensacola State College
GA	Georgia State University
ID	Boise State University
IL	Roosevelt University
IN	Vincennes University
KS	Wichita State University
KS	University of Kansas
KY	Western Kentucky University/ Bowling Green
LA	Delgado Community College
LA	Southeastern Louisiana University
LA	University of Louisiana/ Lafayette
MA	Suffolk University
MA	University of Massachusetts/ Boston
MD	Prince George's Community College
MI	Wayne State University
MN	Minneapolis Community & Technical College
MO	Metropolitan Community College
MT	Montana State University/ Northern
NC	Central Carolina Community College
ND	North Dakota State University
NE	Western Nebraska Community College
NM	University of New Mexico
NV	Truckee Meadows Community College
NY	CUNY/ LaGuardia Community College

OH	Cincinnati State Technical and Community College
	Cuyahoga Community College
OK	Redlands Community College
OK	East Central University
PA	University of Pennsylvania
PR	ASPIRA, Inc. of Puerto Rico
SC	Trident Technical College
TN	East Tennessee State University
TN	Austin Peay State University
TN	University of Tennessee
TX	University of Texas/ Brownsville & Texas Southmost College
TX	University of Texas/ Arlington
UT	Weber State University
VA	Southwest Virginia Community College
WI	University of Wisconsin/ Milwaukee
WV	Davis & Elkins College

Appendix B

Focus Group Questions

Focus Group Questions

1. In adjusting to college, what did you find was the biggest challenge in the classroom?

2. In adjusting to college, what did you find was the biggest challenge outside the classroom?

3. Describe what assistance from the institution you found helpful in staying in college?

4. Describe what assistance from others you found helpful in staying in college?

5. Do you know many other military veterans attending the college?

6. Do you consider you military veteran friends key to your support group to stay in college?

7. Academically speaking, how well do you feel you are succeeding?

8. In terms of social integration, how strongly do you feel connected to others on campus?

Asked of VBCS Study Group Only:

9. Question 9: On a scale of 1-10 how important was the social integration with other veterans through the cohort program to your desire or ability to persist in college?

Appendix C

NOTICE OF IRB APPROVAL

NOTICE OF IRB APPROVAL

Protocol Number: 13-095

Institutional Review Board IRB00002836, DHHS FWA00003332

Review Type: ☐Full ☒Expedited

Approval Type: ☒New ☐Extension of Time ☐Revision ☐Continuing Review

Principal Investigator: **Brett Morris**   Faculty Advisor: **Dr. Charles Hausman**

Project Title: **The Effectiveness of Bridge Programs for At-Risk Student Veterans**

Approval Date: **1/4/2013**   Expiration Date: **1/1/2015**

Approved by: **Dr. Steffen Wilson, IRB Chair**

This document confirms that the Institutional Review Board (IRB) has approved the above referenced research project as outlined in the application submitted for IRB review with an immediate effective date.

Principal Investigator Responsibilities: It is the responsibility of the principal investigator to ensure that all investigators and staff associated with this study meet the training requirements for conducting research involving human subjects, follow the approved protocol, use only the approved forms, keep appropriate research records, and comply with applicable University policies and state and federal regulations.

Consent Forms: All subjects must receive a copy of the consent form as approved with the EKU IRB approval stamp. Copies of the signed consent forms must be kept on file unless a waiver has been granted by the IRB.

Adverse Events: Any adverse or unexpected events that occur in conjunction with this study must be reported to the IRB within ten calendar days of the occurrence.

Research Records: Accurate and detailed research records must be maintained for a minimum of three years following the completion of the research and are subject to audit.

Changes to Approved Research Protocol: If changes to the approved research protocol become necessary, a description of those changes must be submitted for IRB review and approval prior to implementation. Some changes may be approved by expedited review while others may require full IRB review. Changes include, but are not limited to, those involving study personnel, consent forms, subjects, and procedures.

Annual IRB Continuing Review: This approval is valid through the expiration date noted above and is subject to continuing IRB review on an annual basis for as long as the study is active. It is the responsibility of the principal investigator to submit the annual continuing review request and receive approval prior to the anniversary date of the approval. Continuing reviews may be used to continue a project for up to three years from the original approval date, after which time a new application must be filed for IRB review and approval.

Final Report: Within 30 days from the expiration of the project, a final report must be filed with the IRB. A copy of the research results or an abstract from a resulting publication or presentation must be attached. If copies of significant new findings are provided to the research subjects, a copy must be also be provided to the IRB with the final report.

Other Provisions of Approval, if applicable: None

Please contact Sponsored Programs at 859-622-3636 or send email to tiffany.hamblin@eku.edu or lisa.royalty@eku.edu with questions about this approval or reporting requirements.

Appendix D

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

A Bridge Programs Effect on Non-College Ready Student Veterans

Why am I being asked to participate in this research?

You are being invited to take part in a research study about student veteran success in college. You are being invited to participate in this research study because you are a student veteran attending the university where the research is being conducted. If you take part in this study, you will be one of about 120 people to do so.

Who is doing the study?

The person conducting this study is Brett Morris, an Ed.D graduate student at Eastern Kentucky University. He is being guided in this research by Dr. Charles Hausman in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies.

What is the purpose of the study?

The study will examine whether the Veterans Bridge to College Success (VBCS) instituted at Eastern Kentucky University in 2010 is an effecitve model for remediating student veteran academic readiness deficiencies. Effectiveness will be determined by examining second year retention rates, term and cumulative GPA, and course failure rates of the VBCS control group against the population of new student veterans who were deemed academically preapred based upon their academic credentials at the time of admission. By doing this study, we hope to learn whether student veterans involved in the bridge program demonstrate persistence equal to their peers.

Where is the study going to take place and how long will it last?

The research procedures will be conducted at Eastern Kentucky University in Room 442 of the Student Success Building (SSB). You will need to come to campus only one time to participate in a focus group lasting approximately one hour. An individual follow up interview (in person or telephonically) lasting no more than one hour may be requested if clarification of responses given during the focus group is needed. The total amount of time you will be asked to volunteer for this study is 2 hours over the next 2 months.

What will I be asked to do?

This study will be examining the academic performance of student veterans at Eastern Kentucky University. By signing this consent form you acknowledge and permit the researcher to obtain from the institution your grade point average data and class letter grades or pass/failure rates to support the study's findings.

Your participation in this study is totally voluntary and requires access to your academic records. Your records will remain confidential and your privacy will be protected throughout. To insure privacy each participant will be given a numerical code and all information will be referred to by numerical code throughout the study to maintain confidentiality.

Should you agree, you will be asked to participate in a one-hour focus group session that will be tape recorded for later transcription. During the focus group you will be asked questions regarding your academic and social integration to university life. If needed, you may be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview should clarification of a response you made during the focus group be necessary.

 While your academic performance will be used in this study, you will not be asked or expected to publicly reveal your academic performance to other members of the group and your response to questions will not be coerced in any manner.   Your feedback during the focus group interview will be kept confidential. You will be expected to keep the comments of others made within the focus group interview confidential as well. Your consent confirms your willingness to participate in the study under these conditions.

Are there reasons why I should not take part in this study?
There are no reasons that would disqualify you from participating in this research other than your desire not to be involved.

What are the possible risks and discomforts?
You may experience mild stress when discussing previous academic experiences that may have been stressful at the time they occurred; however, no risks or discomforts are foreseen.   You may exit the focus group at will and will not be coerced for responses to questions.

Will I benefit from taking part in this study?
There is no guarantee that you will get any benefit from taking part in this study. However, there is a need for data on student veteran persistence in higher education. Your participation may add to the general knowledge about this subject.

Do I have to take part in this study?
If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you really want to volunteer. You will not lose any benefits or rights you would normally have if you choose not to

volunteer. You can stop at any time during the study and still keep the benefits and rights you had before volunteering.

What will it cost me to participate?
There are no costs associated with taking part in this study.

Will I receive any payment or rewards for taking part in the study?
You will not receive any payment or reward for taking part in this study.

Who will see the information I give?
Your information will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. When we write up the study to share it with other researchers, we will write about this combined information. You will not be identified in these written materials.

Can my taking part in the study end early?
If you decide to take part in the study, you still have the right to decide at any time that you no longer want to participate. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in the study.

The individuals conducting the study may need to end your participation in the study. They may do this if you are not able to follow the directions they give you or if they find that your being in the study is more risk than benefit to you.

What if I have questions?
Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions about the study, you can contact the investigator, Brett Morris at 859-582-5774. If you have any questions about your rights as a research volunteer, contact the staff in the Division of Sponsored Programs at Eastern Kentucky University at 859-622-3636. We will give you a copy of this consent form to take with you.

What else do I need to know?
You will be told if any new information is learned which may affect your condition or influence your willingness to continue taking part in this study.

I have thoroughly read this document, understand its contents, have been given an opportunity to have my questions answered, and agree to participate in this research project.

_____   _____

Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study   Date

_____

Printed name of person taking part in the study

_____

Name of person providing information to subject

Circle all that apply:

Branch of Service: Army   Navy   USAF   USMC

Component: Active Duty   Reserve   Guard

Combat Service: Iraq   Afghanistan   None

VITA

Brett Morris is a retired Lieutenant Colonel from the United States Army. As a

Field Artillery officer, Foreign Area Officer and Strategist, he served over 24 years on

active duty in a variety of assignments at the battery, battalion, brigade and division level.

He also served as an instructor at the School of the Americas and a multi-service doctrine

writer at the Air-Land-Sea Application Center at Langley AFB. His final Army

assignment was as the Professor of Military Science at Eastern Kentucky University.

Since his retirement in 2005 he has extended his experience in the field of education by

teaching high school for several years until returning to EKU to serve as the Associate

Director for Veterans Affairs in the Student Outreach and Transition Office. During his

tenure EKU was ranked the Best for Vets: College in the nation by Military Times EDGE

Magazine. He has presented on Operation Veteran Success at the NASPA Regional

Conference 2011 and the Veterans Symposium in 2011. He currently serves as the

Director of Admissions at EKU.